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15TH BIRTHDAY SPECIAL

- The developers who have defined modern videogames
- Behind the scenes of issue-one cover star Splinter Cell
- The winners and losers of the past 15 years

MARIO Vs ZELDA

2017's games of the year revealed

THE LAST OF US: PART II

Cutting through Naughty Dog's brutal new details

SPECTACULAR SPIDER-MAN

Why Insomniac's latest is shaping up to be a stunner

DAVID CAGE EXCLUSIVE

DETROIT

BECOME HUMAN

THE REAL STORY BEHIND QUANTIC DREAM'S PROVOCATIVE PS4 THRILLER

HIGHLIGHTS

GHOST OF TSUSHIMA ■ CONCRETE GENIE ■ ERICA ■ HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE ■ ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS ■ GUACAMELEE! 2 ■ WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS ■ CALL OF DUTY: WWII ■ SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS ■ ANIMAL CROSSING: POCKET CAMP

Future

ISSUE 194



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15 years. It's a pretty amazing milestone for any institution to hit, perhaps even more so in a world such as magazines and print media where things have changed and shifted so much since 2002. When **games™** first launched in December of that year there were no such things as game streaming or social media to think about. Games media and criticism have evolved and grown at an exceptional rate in that time, and **games™** has been there all the while, riding the wave.

As the custodian of this magazine, I think a great deal about what **games™** stands for and what makes it different from everything else out there. Over and over again I come back to the same thought that it's about how we stay true to our identity as gamers, first and foremost. We may have the privilege to rub shoulders with developers, producers, writers and artists in the industry, but we're always gamers at our core and we try not to let go of that.

So, whether you've been with us since issue one, are picking us up for the first time or sit somewhere in-between, I just wanted to say a heartfelt and earnest thank you from me, everyone on the **games™** team and all those who have helped put this magazine together over the last decade and a half for your support and continued passion for gaming. Together we've watched the games industry mature into exactly the kind of entertainment behemoth that we always believed it deserved to be, and we hope that over the years we've managed to give you some insight and greater appreciation of the creativity that has made that possible.

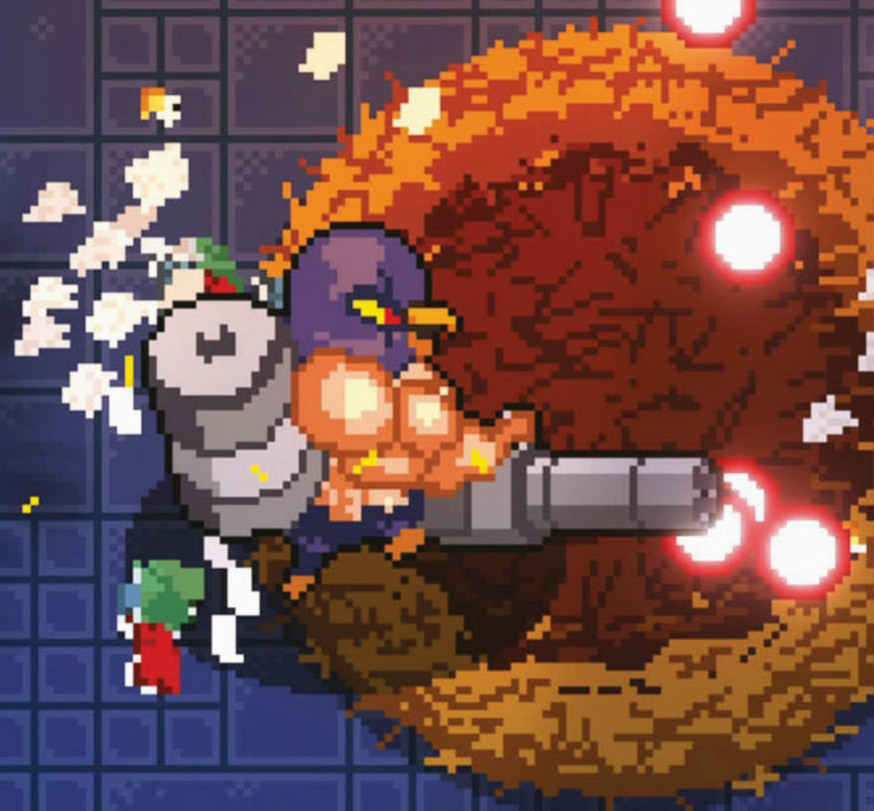
When you get a moment, please raise a glass for **games™** and the next 15 years. We'll certainly be raising a few. Cheers.

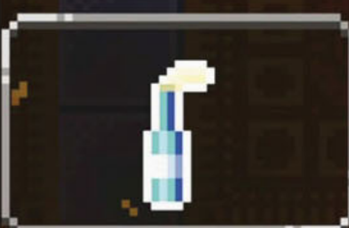
Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




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194



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Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 194 | 17


10 Spider-Man

ACCESS

08 Live the life of the samurai in Ghost Of Tsushima

10 Spider-Man is getting the game he always deserved

12 Our favourite The Last Of Us: Part II theories so far

13 Concrete Genie offers a light in the dark

14 Erica closes the gap between games and film

16 Everything that's new about Guacamelee! 2

18 Has Shadow Of The Colossus' magic been lost in time?

20 Animal Crossing: Pocket Park proves Nintendo has mastered mobile

22 How the secrets of Hellblade's success were in the eyes

24 How the original Xbox classics fill the gaps on Xbox One X


12 The Last Of Us 2


68 Assassin's Creed Origins

FEATURES

28 **Detroit: Become Human**
We sit down with David Cage, one of gaming's most challenging and sometimes controversial creators, to dig into his latest project

36 **2017 games of the year**
This last year has been packed full of incredible games, but as impressive as the experiences have been the visuals we've been treated to. We celebrate some of the very best

44 **The making of Kentucky Route Zero**
It was an adventure game like no other, and yet nearly five years since its release it doesn't get the recognition it deserves. We look to set that right with developer Cardboard Computer

50 **World domination**
We sit down with PlayerUnknown himself, Brenden Greene, to see how *Battlegrounds* is evolving ahead of its console debut on Xbox One

54 **15 years of games™**
We celebrate a decade and a half of this storied magazine by interviewing some of the incredible developers who have helped to shape our lifetime

REVIEWS

68 Assassin's Creed Origins
72 Call Of Duty: WWII
74 Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds
75 Echo
75 Fire Emblem Warriors
76 The Evil Within 2
78 GT Sport
80 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus
82 South Park: The Fractured But Whole
83 AER: Memories Of Old
83 Golf Story
84 Ruiner


72 Call Of Duty: WWII

FAVOURITES

26 **Why I Love… Quake III Arena**
Andrew Vidler, technical director, Ninja Theory

86 **Why I Love… Day Of The Tentacle**
Jodie Azhar, lead technical artist, Creative Assembly

110 **The Vault**
games™ sifts through the myriad accessories and add-ons the industry offers so you don't have to


96 Splinter Cell

RETRO

90 **The Retro Guide To Atari 2600**
Having celebrated 40 years since its launch in the US, we take a look back at the incredible library of titles on one of the most successful games systems in history

96 **Behind the scenes of Splinter Cell**
It starred on the cover of **games™** issue 1 back in 2002, but how was it originally made? We catch up with game director Francois Coulon to get the full story

102 **Retro Interview: Ron Gilbert**
We catch up with the *Thimbleweed Park* creator to reflect on his fantastic career and the longevity of adventure games

106 **Game Changers: Half-Life**
One of the most iconic first-person shooters of all time and a landmark release for developer Valve, **games™** remembers an early pioneer for videogame's most popular genre



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28 Feature

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

We find out how Quantic Dream is continuing to explore what it means to be human through its latest, most ambitious and most dramatic game yet

LIVE THE LIFE OF THE SAMURAI IN GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

→ SUCKER PUNCH TURNS AWAY FROM THE STREETS OF SEATTLE AND HEADS TO THE MAJESTY OF FEUDAL JAPAN

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY** | DEVELOPER: **SUCKER PUNCH** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

The industry left the samurai behind. *Tenchu* and *Onimusha* faded into the annals of history, while *Genji* never quite found its footing between the generation divide. For the longest time, it had looked as if we would never receive the sprawling open-world samurai game that the period so clearly deserves. Enter Infamous developer Sucker Punch, breaking silence after three years – following the release of PS4 launch title *Second Son* and its 2014 expansion *First Light* – and looking to deliver the ultimate samurai experience in *Ghost Of Tsushima*.

"We wanted to have a clear fantasy for the player. Who are you [and] what are you going to be doing in the game? And then we came upon this game idea, which is awesomely simple – to hear about it is to want to play it," teased creative director Nate Fox as he revealed his labour of love. "When we hit upon the Mongol invasion of Tsushima of 1274, it all clicked. Suddenly, we knew who the heroes were, who the villains were, what the stakes were for the world, and we had a videogame."

If Infamous let us explore myriad powers, *Ghost Of Tsushima* will show us what it is to *be* a power – the last samurai of Tsushima, caught up in the first Mongol invasion of Japan. 1274 was a pivotal time in history; the battle for this strategically located island was bloody and brutal as the Kublai Khan looked to extend its dynasty out from China and Korea, its sights focused on Japan.

You will be tasked with exploring a truly gorgeous open-world here as battered samurai Jin (played by Daisuke Tsuji), attempting to battle against overwhelming odds and adapt to the devastating terror inflicted upon the land by the Khan. You'll wield ancient weaponry in this exciting 2018 PlayStation 4 exclusive, look to master a new combat discipline (the way of the ghost), and become legend in a world being torn apart by war.

"Feudal Japan is beautiful; from the swaying bamboo forests to the ornate castles, it's a place that demands to be explored. Don't you want to wear a suit of samurai armour? Wouldn't you like to fire a six-foot-tall samurai long bow? Want to journey across a lush countryside with a katana on your hip? For me, the answer is clearly 'yes, yes please.'"



IN BRIEF

Infamous developer Sucker Punch heads to Feudal Japan for its latest open world adventure game, *Ghost Of Tsushima*



SPIDER-MAN IS GETTING THE GAME HE ALWAYS DESERVED

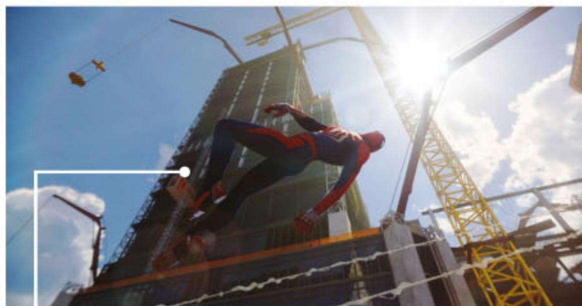
→ INSOMNIAC IS PROVING ONCE AND FOR ALL THAT IT'S THE PERFECT STUDIO TO TAKE ON THIS MARVEL CLASSIC

FORMAT: **PS4** | DEVELOPER: **INSOMNIAC GAMES**
PUBLISHER: **SONY** | RELEASE: **Q1 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

***Spider-Man* has always had a contentious relationship with the world of videogames.** No developer has ever quite nailed the balance between free-flowing navigation, buoyant combat and quick-witted dialogue that has come to define the role; each studio that has taken on the character has usually left its mark in one of these areas, but has never been able to pull it all together into one cohesive whole. That's where Insomniac is hoping to make an impression, despite existing for over two decades, this is a studio that feels purpose-built to deliver the Spidey fantasy we've always wanted.

That's because it understands the character of both Spider-Man and Peter Parker, and the struggle that exists between the two roles. It knows how to build fluid movement systems and integrate them with punchy, irreverent fighting styles (we have Sunset Overdrive to thank for that), and can it deliver a few laughs? Are you kidding us, of course it can. Spider-Man is in Insomniac's DNA, and that's what makes this 2018 Sony exclusive so damned exciting. By offering a fully formed version of New York City to explore, by giving us a Peter Parker eight years into his career as the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man, and by having the confidence to utilise the full extent of villains, periphery figures and storylines at its disposal, we are in for a special superhero game with *Spider-Man*.

"INSOMNIA
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BEAUTIFUL OPEN-WORLD

Spider-Man could very well be the first videogame to find a happy balance between navigation, combat and content in an open-world environment. Typically, studios have struggled to strike a suitable one between all three, although Insomniac knows what it's doing. The studio has built its reputation on stylish navigation, quippy writing and great mission design, and of course, incredibly focused combat mechanics. Spider-Man has never been in a safer pair of hands.



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GO TO COLLIDE"

SPOILT FOR CHOICE

While many of the previous *Spider-Man* games and movies have had a tendency to focus on the same familiar cast of villains, Insomniac recognises that it is spoiled for choice in this respect. Mister Negative will take centre stage the dichotomy of Martin Li's situation a reflection of Peter's own although we should expect to see some surprises along the way. Shocker has been teased; will the rest of the Sinister Seven follow, or will Insomniac dive into the archives?

IN BRIEF

Insomniac, the developer behind *Ratchet & Clank* and *Sunset Overdrive*, takes on *Spider-Man* in what is sure to be match made in heaven



DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Insomniac understands that the best *Spider-Man* stories are those that cause the lives of Peter Parker and his alter ego to collide; while the thrust of the game is focused around the antics of the web-slinger, we will also have the opportunity to play as Peter trying to navigate his day-to-day. Additionally, we will be able to take control of Mary Jane too, giving a broader view of the impact Peter is having on both the city and those closest to him.



IN BRIEF
We return to a world in decay, infested with clickers and driven mad by the decline of civilisation, but what has become of Ellie and Joel?

OUR FAVOURITE THE LAST OF US: PART II THEORIES SO FAR

→ NAUGHTY DOG'S LATEST REVEAL WAS BRUTAL (PERHAPS TOO MUCH SO), BUT IT'S LEAD TO A FLURRY OF NEW IDEAS

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY** | DEVELOPER: **NAUGHTY DOG** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**



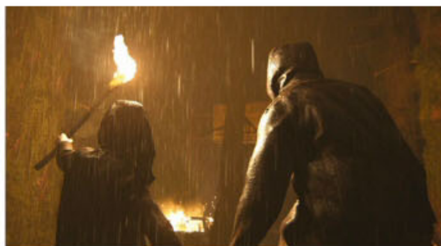
Context can be very important, as Sony and Naughty Dog were likely reminded rather starkly when they faced a barrage of negative feedback for the unexplained brutality and violence of its most recent *The Last Of Us: Part II* trailer. But context can be found, as those following the game were able to decipher, thanks to a series of supporting images, clues and tweets in the last few weeks.

We've spoken extensively in the past in defence of games using violent imagery, so we would be hypocritical to criticise the scene that has been shown, but it was shocking and without knowing how it sits in the game, even a little, it was rather jarring. You might also think that it doesn't really tell us anything about the game, save for it being pretty nasty, but actually there's enough out there now to give us some clues, as intrepid fans have been exploring.



THE HANGING WOMAN

1 There has been plenty of speculation around all of the characters in Naughty Dog's new trailer, but most of it has focused around the woman at its heart, being hung by what appears to be a religious cult. The favoured theory is that this could be Ellie's mother Anna before the birth of her child. We know from Naughty Dog tweets she'll be played by Laura Bailey, a highly accomplished voice actor best known for her role as Nadine Ross in *Uncharted 4*, but unlike the other cast members, her character name has been withheld. The plot thickens.



GODFATHER THEORY

2 This one might be our favourite, but it's been suggested that since Anna is known to have died within a day of Ellie's birth, that if she is in *The Last Of Us: Part II*, it could be something similar to *The Godfather: Part II*, where we split the game between the events of Anna's life and those of Ellie. It ties in nicely with the naming convention Naughty Dog has chosen for this sequel, as well as offering a unique narrative structure for the experience. The movie is also a great example of a sequel to a masterpiece that many consider as good if not better than the original, if Naughty Dog is looking for a good omen.



THE CULT AND THE FIREFLIES

3 Lots of speculation about the origin of the seeming cult, why its members all have scars on their cheeks (note that the hanging woman doesn't) and whether the phrase 'clip her wings' might be a Fireflies reference. We like the idea that the outcasts from this group, who seem to think of the infected as demons, might actually go on to form the Fireflies, who Ellie is know apparently hunting down and killing. Did Anna have a big part to play in that organisation? Was her death their fault? Could be a fascinating direction to follow.





CONCRETE GENIE OFFERS A LIGHT IN THE DARK

→ AN INTUITIVE ADVENTURE GAME THAT SHOWS THAT THERE'S STILL LIFE LEFT IN THE MOTION GAMING DREAM

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY** | DEVELOPER: **PIXELOPUS** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

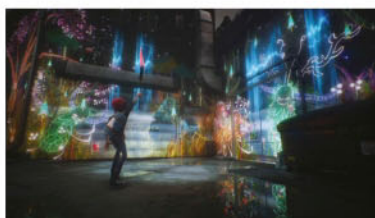
The world can be a bit of a miserable place. For Ash, a teenager stuck in the isolated fishing down of Denska, that means dealing with the stain of pollution and a local gaggle of bullies. Thankfully, this needn't be his reality for long; *Concrete Genie* puts you in charge of cleaning up the streets with a magic paintbrush, using the power of paint to cleanse the surrounding area of pollution and hopefully make a few new wondrous friends along the way.

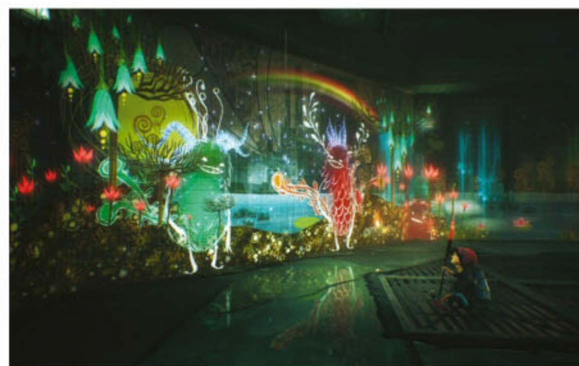
While motion-controlled gaming never took off in a big way for Sony, its internal studios have done a pretty good job with it over the years. The DualShock controller, in particular, has proven to be a more than adequate tool for exploring new types of innovative play – just look at the work of Super Punch with *Infamous: Second Son* or Supermassive with *Until Dawn* for proof of that fact. Pixelopus, the studio behind *Entwined*, is planning on using it as an extension of your fingertips – giving you the freedom to splash paint across the village and bring your creations to life. The idea, as simple as it may seen, is for anybody to be able to paint in this game, and it'll take just a handful of strokes of the brush to turn the walls into beautiful, reactive pieces of living artwork.

IN BRIEF
Clean up a miserable fishing village with a dash of optimism and a brush of colour

For *Concrete Genie* this is important to note, because it affords Ash the opportunity to paint the friends he has never had in his real life into existence. The game isn't just a cute opportunity to splash some colour across a drab world; it's also dealing with the nature of bullying and overcoming social pressures. What we're trying to say is that there is more than meets the eye here; *Concrete Genie* looks gorgeous in action, sharp and intuitive, while its story and themes give it more depth than your average smaller-scale production.

Scheduled for release in 2018, powered by the Unreal Engine 4, *Concrete Genie* is yet another example of Sony supporting new ideas and keen initiatives. What'll be interesting to see is how the game deals with letting off the leash, of backing away from templated designs, before going crazy with your own creations as the game progresses. Either way, keep your eyes locked to this one – we think it's going to be something special.





Above: *Concrete Genie* looks absolutely stunning in action. The living paintings are really something, particularly when the game begins to use them for puzzle solving and in combat situations as the bullies swarm our small-town hero.



Above: Sony seems to have been mastering the neon light in a dark location look since the release of *Infamous: Second Son*. This is a very different game, but the visual impact it boasts is very similar indeed.

ERICA CLOSES THE GAP BETWEEN GAMES AND FILM



■ Above: *Erica* is designed to be a short and sweet experience, taking just a handful of hours to play through. Designed around replayability, it's supposed to replace the Friday night movie experience.

→ THE CLOSEST WE'VE COME TO AN INTERACTIVE MOVIE YET

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY** | DEVELOPER: **FLAVOURWORKS** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

Sony is making a real push to ensure that its 'For the players' mantra is more than a mere marketing message. PlayLink is bringing games to the PlayStation 4 that are designed primarily as an experience – one to be enjoyed by any and all – rather than a pure challenge, requiring no knowledge of how to wield a controller or navigate virtual spaces. *Erica* is perhaps one of the biggest proponents of this philosophy, the debut title from Flavourworks that's perhaps the closest we've come to receiving a full-on interactive movie experience.

Erica is a unique live-action adventure, built around a branching narrative where every choice has a profound impact on the game and the characters caught within it. We've seen it in action and we have to admit, it's certainly impressive. The studio has promised that the game features no trace of 3D modelling, which is a little crazy given that any and all objects that can be interacted with are bound by a realistic physics engine. Interactions and dialogue selections are controlled entirely by flicks of the finger across a phone screen (or a Dualshock controller, should you rather) and physical actions are tied to decision-making in the game.

Bursting through a door, for example, could alert others to your presence earlier than expected, while inching it open slowly may give you a little extra time to snoop around a room for clues. Again, with the game reacting dynamically to your interaction, feeding live-action footage forward to your eyes in real-time with no pausing or interruptions, Flavourworks has crafted something very impressive – the technology behind *Erica* could have a huge impact on the FMV development scene in the future.

While we have a little concern over the direction of the overall narrative – which sees *Erica* (played well by actor Sophie Delpitzzo) caught between an old family friend and a killer on the loose – which feels as if it's an area bereft of new ideas, we are certainly eager to see how the introduction of interaction and branching pathways can make a fairly well-worn story new again.

Erica is lined up for a 2018 release and joins Supermassive's *Hidden Agenda* as an exciting new breed of games looking to truly bring the whole household into the joys of gaming.



■ Actor Sophie Delpitzzo takes centre stage in *Erica*, with Flavourworks utilising the same cameras, sets and production techniques as you'd expect to see from a modern Hollywood film.

IN BRIEF

Erica is an experimental live-action adventure that integrates smart interactions with Hollywood-quality production

SONY FLESHES OUT ITS **PSVR** ROSTER

→ THERE ARE SOME REALLY COOL NEW GAMES ON THE WAY



BLOOD & TRUTH

FORMAT: **PSVR** | DEV: **SONY LONDON STUDIOS** | ETA: **TBC 2018**

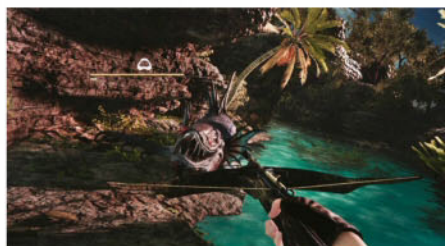
Inspired by *The London Heist* in its PSVR launch anthology PlayStation VR Worlds, London Studios has fleshed out its grit and glamour vision of England's capital into a much larger virtual adventure. You'll be occupying the boots of a special forces soldier looking to rescue his family from the clutches of the local criminal overlords. Expect lots of shooting, puzzle solving and perhaps some nice stealth action too.



SPRINT VECTOR

FORMAT: **PSVR, PC** | DEV: **SURVIOS** | ETA: **TBC 2018**

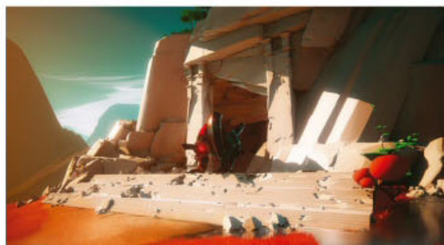
Managing to convey speed and movement in VR is easy, but doing it in such a way that you don't make the person playing it feel nauseous is quite another matter. That *Sprint Vector* has been picking up plenty of convention buzz over recent months suggests that this isn't proving to be a problem, even though the whole experience is about running, leaping and flying at incredible speeds in a game show race.



MONSTER OF THE DEEP: FINAL FANTASY XV

FORMAT: **PSVR** | DEV: **SQUARE ENIX** | ETA: **OUT NOW**

You wanted a *Final Fantasy XV* fishing game to take full advantage of PlayStation VR right? Of course you did; it was at the top of everyone's wish list. So here we have it, the latest update to Square Enix's massive RPG, bringing virtual reality angling to the world of Eos. Noctis, Ignis, Prompto and Gladio continue their road trip, this time stopping off to catch some fish and face a monster in the depths.



MEGALITH

FORMAT: **PSVR** | DEV: **DISRUPTIVE GAMES** | ETA: **TBC 2018**

This multiplayer hero shooter has you in the role of a titan, a massive beast hoping to be made a god through victory in combat. It's an online multiplayer experience that lets you customise your fighting style as you journey towards dominance for yourself and your disciples. We'll be interested to see if that plays out as a kind of minion system, but as it stands, with its combat and destructible environments, this looks like a lot of fun.



EDEN TOMORROW

FORMAT: **PSVR, PC** | DEV: **SURVIOS** | ETA: **TBC 2018**

Two things VR seems to be aptly built to deliver are sci-fi worlds and dinosaurs. So, why not both? *Eden Tomorrow* doesn't actually have dinosaurs as such from what we've seen, but its hulking beasts and monsters aren't far off. This story-driven experience places you in a mysterious world with structures and puzzles that suggest a deeper secret that needs to be revealed. You can colour us intrigued.



STAR CHILD

FORMAT: **PSVR** | DEV: **PLAYFUL CORP** | ETA: **TBC 2018**

The maker of *Super Lucky's Tale* hasn't given up on VR despite translating its Oculus platformer to the Xbox One, as this PSVR exclusive proves. This takes the developer in a more sci-fi direction as you play as Spectra and her companion, stranded on an alien planet and running from a world-destroying threat. Spectra gains the ability to manipulate the world around her, so expect some pretty spectacular effects.



APEX CONSTRUCT

FORMAT: **PSVR, PC** | DEV: **FAST TRAVEL GAMES** | ETA: **TBC 2018**

This new developer, founded by veterans of Rovio, EA and DICE, is looking at VR first and is releasing its debut game as a PSVR exclusive, which is cool to see for the Sony platform. *Apex Construct* throws you into a fascinating world of robots and decay as you search, solve puzzles, piece together the story and fire a bow and arrow at other machines that attack you. It looks very polished already.



BOW TO BLOOD

FORMAT: **PSVR** | DEV: **TRIBETOY** | ETA: **TBC 2018**

While this may look a little like a sky-based *Sea Of Thieves* style sailing experience, it's actually a much more intense battle arena shooter. You must fight to become the champion of The Arena and defeat the wicked plots of the overseers as they throw AI challenges against you. Fight, race and more in this game's airborne vessels in what's looking like a very fun and colourful new VR title.



STIFLED

FORMAT: **PSVR** | DEV: **GATTAI GAMES** | ETA: **OUT NOW**

This game, which is based around echolocation, is one of the more innovative and unique we've seen attempted in the VR space. The game is a blank screen, but the objects in the world are revealed to you by the noises your character makes and by those you make into your microphone. The only trouble is that the enemies in the game can hear you too and will locate you if you get too noisy. A wonderfully tense concept.

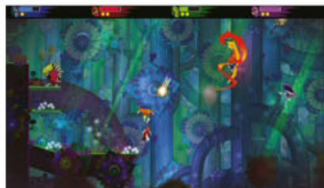
IN BRIEF
The mask of vengeance is back, and it is up to Juan to defeat its evil once again and save the world

EVERYTHING THAT'S NEW ABOUT GUACAMELEE! 2

→ CO-OP AND DEMONS AND CHICKENS, OH MY

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **DRINKBOX** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-4**





FOUR-PLAYER CO-OP

1 Drop-in co-op is the big headline grabber as far as we're concerned on *Guacamelee! 2*, as you can have three friends join you locally to take on the game together. The chaos on screen is likely to make the game no less challenging in this format, but it will definitely add to the fun, having others to experience this game's insanity with you.



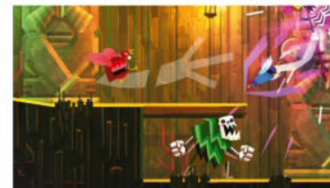
EAGLE BOOST

2 If you played through the original *Guacamelee!* and thought, "This game is too slow and restricted by gravity" then the addition of a hookshot mechanic that lets you grab onto hooks in the world and launch yourself around the level, chaining the grappling leaps together, will likely please you. And it's not the only new element along these lines.



CRAZY NEW LEVELS

3 The threat facing Juan Aguacate is far more multi-faceted than before, not least because it appears to be coming from another dimension, which opens *Guacamelee!* up for some amazing new stage designs. Gravity shifting, morphing platforms and more are coming into play to keep you on your toes and leaping around like a maniac.



SUPER CHICKEN!

4 Being turned into a chicken in the original *Guacamelee!* could be a harrowing moment, but for this sequel it appears Drinkbox wants things to feel far more exciting and empowering, even when you're reduced to a feathery fowl. Moves such as Chicken Shot, which allows you to burst forward in diagonal motions, breaking through barriers, really elevates this portion of the game.



OMEN by hp



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HAS SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS' MAGIC BEEN LOST IN TIME?

→ HANDS-ON WITH A LEGENDARY TITLE REBORN FOR MODERN EYES

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY** | DEVELOPER: **BLUEPOINT, TEAM ICO** | RELEASE: **8 FEB 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

Team ICO unleashed a truly landmark game in *Shadow Of The Colossus*; the 2005 PlayStation 2 classic is without question one of the all-time greats, a surreal and powerful adventure that felt like the absolute antithesis of what was happening elsewhere in the industry. Sony's decision to order a full remake of the game from Bluepoint was certainly a welcomed surprise, but there was some concern on our end that, in attempting to overhaul *Shadow Of The Colossus,* some of its magic would be lost in the high-definition translation. It is, after all, a product of a different time; a stark and subdued experience that found perfection in its endless emptiness, its atmosphere a direct result of the PS2's limitations as much as it was a deliberate design decision.

Seeing *Shadow Of The Colossus* running on a PS4 Pro, its spanning vistas presented in 4K and HDR for the very first time, it's enough to take your breath away. That isn't hyperbole; it's a required medical warning. Bluehole has done a phenomenal job here and there's no way to prepare for the way it's going to make you *feel*. Approaching the first of the colossi is still as awe-inspiring today as it was in 2005; the creature's fur might be denser and the detail across its body more intricate than ever, but the encounter has lost none of its lustre.

The pang of guilt still ricochets through your heart as you plunge your sword deep into the silent giant, and the swell of the score as the beast falls limply to the earth is still a gut punch through the initial adrenaline rush of earning your 'victory'. *Shadow Of The Colossus* is as important for gaming and the industry today as it ever was, and there's still so much it can teach us – as players, as developers, and as appreciators of interactive entertainment – as the industry looks to widen the purview of the videogame experience.

It is strange though, seeing it this way. It's certainly bold and visually impressive, imbued with ultra high-definition textures, but there's an extent to which you've never seen *Shadow Of The Colossus* this way – and that isn't necessarily for the better.

The world was always the charm; its emptiness and that clawing sense of isolation that came with it. The feeling of hopelessness that sunk in over the hours as you roamed the land looking to wipe all of its life from existence – you don't want to do it, but there's something out there in its shadows that compels you to.

Where it was once miserable, the world now looks a little brighter. You can pick out hues of red in the rocks, scratches of colour in the sky, and look out upon the sprawling mess of moss across the otherwise barren deserts. It's beautiful and awe-inspiring, but it felt foreign. In some sense, *Shadow Of The Colossus* really had a home on the PS2.

That said, it's still going to be a must play, even if it's a little more vibrant than it was before. The core of the game is still intact, albeit with a few minor embellishments from Bluehole. The controls are still as clumsy and unintuitive as ever, and the camera is still a force unto itself, but it's these imperfections that help make *Shadow Of The Colossus* what it is. It's a game that springs to life in its battles with the colossi – each a challenging puzzle to solve and a majestic feat of game design in and of itself. None of that has been lost here, and Bluehole should certainly be praised for the improvements it has made to the art assets and for the performance improvements it has made behind the scenes.

Whether the more vibrant aesthetic will have any major impact to the *feeling* of the game remains to be seen, but either way this is a must play – whether you are going in for the first time or returning to relive past misguided heroics.





The colossi battles haven't dulled with age. They are still incredible, breathtaking encounters. With no new content being added to the game, we recommend you go in as blind as you can – rediscovering them all over again is half of the fun.



Protagonist Wanda and his loyal horse Argo are still pretty unwieldy. Bluehole has shown great restraint here, opting to convert as much of the original game feel and experience as humanly possible.







"SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS IS AS IMPORTANT FOR GAMING AND THE INDUSTRY TODAY AS IT EVER WAS"

Shadow Of The Colossus is without question one of the best-looking games available on the PS4 hardware, particularly for those of you with a Pro. After the somewhat problematic remaster from a few years back, it's great to receive such a pure conversion.

IN BRIEF

Team ICO's legendary PS2 game *Shadow Of The Colossus* receives a full remake for the modern era

THE PUREST OPEN WORLD

The last decade has seen the scope and size of open worlds grow exponentially. They are full of things to do, things to see and objectives to complete – player retention has become tied directly to busy work. But that's part of what makes *Shadow Of The Colossus* feel so refreshing. It is one of the purest open worlds ever created, simultaneously bereft of things to do and impossible to look away from. It's free of mission markers and waypoints; there are no NPCs, no rules and no distractions. It's free of mess and noise, leaving you with just its silent beauty and haunting isolation to keep you entertained.

ANIMALCROSSING: POCKET CAMP PROVES NINTENDO HAS MASTERED MOBILE

→ A SUCCESS STORY THAT WE SHOULD HAVE PREDICTED

FORMAT: ANDROID, IOS | PUBLISHER: NINTENDO | DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE | RELEASE: NOVEMBER 2017 | PLAYERS: 1

From the outside looking in, Nintendo can often look like a company in conflict; with itself, with modern trends, with other companies and indeed the general direction of the wider videogame industry as a whole. Because, in spite of its consistent innovation in both hardware and software, it so often seems to stumble on what we now perceive to be the basics. Network infrastructure is, for example, still something of a mess across the family of systems – an area Microsoft and Sony conquered a decade ago, and leant on heavily to push its consoles onto an ever-expanding player base.

But why is this important in the context of mobile gaming? Because Nintendo has demonstrated a tendency to shy away from the expectations of the Smartphone generation – those that have grown up expecting their content to be easily transferable and sharable, who expect easy online play after it had become standardised elsewhere. If Nintendo couldn't get this right across the 3DS, Wii U or Switch how would it ever successfully enter into a world that it found to be entirely foreign: that of the mobile marketplace?

As ever, Nintendo has proven that questioning its ability or motives isn't just foolhardy, but entirely stupid. In the last 12 months the company has proven that it is not only more than capable of dominating the mobile space, but of leveraging its biggest IP for market in an intelligent fashion as well. The launch of social networking service *Miitomo* in 2016 wasn't a foreshadow of what was to come, but a cursory exploration of the space; *Fire Emblem Heroes* has proven to be a monumental success, as too was the decision to hand off development of *Pokémon Go* to Niantic. *Super Mario Run* might be underperforming against internal expectations but it's difficult to find complaint in its core, endlessly enjoyable play. What then of its latest, *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp*?

It's too early to know for certain what impact this will have on business for Nintendo, how it will affect its share prices or how the masses will measure it up against its other mobile releases. But none of that really matters, not really. Damn the investors and damn the financial forecasts; with *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* played to death, and with no Switch game in sight, we were eager to see whether having Animal Crossing in our pockets would be as enjoyable and as wholly time-destructive as we had always imagined it could be.

After hours (oh god the hours, so many hours) spent tending to our very own virtual campsite, making new animal friends and paying off hefty loan sums (we were tricked into taking it out by a trio of cunning birds by the way, and yes, we are calling the police) we can happily confirm that this is a faithful, scaled-down Animal Crossing experience. It covers the essentials, but it's more focused than any Animal Crossing game you've played before; smaller in scope, but perhaps richer in detail and purpose because of it.

> "IT'S DIFFICULT TO SEE WHAT ELSE NINTENDO COULD HAVE DONE TO INTEGRATE ANIMAL CROSSING WITH MOBILE"

Animal Crossing is, and has always been, a game focused around diligently completing belittling busywork. It is, by its very nature, supremely chill, but only because (much like the real life parallel it draws from) the only way to conquer a mountain of debt and approach impossibly difficult neighbourhood friendships is with patience and perseverance. The reward – the sense of accomplishment – isn't found in the completion of an arbitrary objective (and this is where Animal Crossing veers from real life) but in the grind itself. The game is in the grind, and that's part of what made Animal Crossing such a perfect IP to work within the confines of the mobile space – not to mention the aggressive microtransaction systems that comes along with it.

Pocket Camp is carefree and casual, but it's also intensely difficult to put down. With a customisable main hub to tend to, four varied areas (each with its own distinct fruit or wildlife to claim as your own), two marketplace hubs and a dedicated multiplayer game space, there's just about enough variation here to keep the hourly cycle engaging and worthy of your time. The core game consists of collecting items strewn around, gifting them to the animals that you find rambling on and then crafting new items with your rewards for doing so, all done in an effort to appease travellers enough to hand over their cash and come kick it back at your campsite.

While some of you will no doubt miss the larger area and general character of a full town or village setting – not to mention the constant busy work of clean up, recycling and maintenance that we're accustomed to – it's difficult to see what else Nintendo could have done to integrate Animal Crossing with mobile. Consider this exchange: in full Animal Crossing experiences you'd find fruit, plant it and wait a handful of in-game days for it grow before it could be harvested and deliver it to an animal pal. That loop still exists, only now you have to wait a handful of real-time hours until the fruit grows back instead. Like much of *Pocket Camp* it just *works* exactly as you'd expect it to.

With *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* Nintendo has proven once and for all that it has mastered the mobile space and is fully in control of its own destiny here. The only question that remains now is what can it possibly do next?











Left: *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* is a mobile game from Nintendo that gives you command over a summer camp setting. The longer you spend tapping away, the further you can customise your plot of land. Below: Nintendo has had one hell of a year in the Smartphone space, with *Pokémon Go*, *Super Mario Run*, *Fire Emblem Heroes* and now *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* all proving to be a huge success with players.



IN BRIEF
Design and level up your own campsite, make friends with the cheerful critters by bringing them bugs and fruit and visit other players' camps

WHERE DOES NINTENDO LOOK TO NEXT?

→ With a rich library of IP behind it, and the numbers to prove that its most niche titles can resonate with mobile players, what's next for smartphones?



1 NINTENDOGS

Honestly, we're a little baffled that Nintendo hasn't already resurrected its monstrously successful, critically acclaimed Nintendogs franchise for mobile. With Tamagotchi celebrating its 20th anniversary right now, it would make sense to see Nintendo's own real-time pet simulator revived – making full use of advanced touch screen and voice recognition technology.



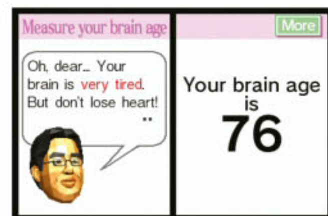
2 WARIOWARE

Short, simple mini-games presented in quick succession that are so easy to play that you'll find time slipping away from you, and so beautifully strange that you won't want to put it down for fear of losing the smile planted across your face. WarioWare is a mobile natural: easy to monetise, simple to update, and perfect for long-term engagement.



3 F-ZERO

Okay, so bear with us on this one. But, like, imagine Captain Falcon sitting in the Blue Falcon with the camera planted firmly behind it. The blistering speed is still there; only success is determined by rhythmic, well-timed screen taps, *Rhythm-action F-Zero*… we'll have to get back to you on this one.



4 DR. KAWASHIMA'S BRAIN TRAINING

Much like Nintendogs, perhaps this seems like too obvious of a fit for the platform, but then we're just surprised Nintendo isn't making use of its most popular Nintendo DS IPs. *Dr. Kawashima's Brain Training* has huge mainstream appeal, helping to shift mountains of consoles from 2006 and beyond. Everything about it makes sense for a switch to mobile.

MISSING THE VOICES

Chatting with Vidler about the making of the game we reached the depiction of Senua's psychosis and, most specifically, the voices that she hears, and how that plays into our experience of the world. It was something that Vidler didn't really get to appreciate while making the game, and it took an extended play session at home for him to see what it was the team had built together.

"Playing the game at Ninja Theory, just trying to find bugs and all of that, you don't play it continuously in most cases," he explains. "You play a little bit of it and do some work around whatever bug you found in that little bit that you've reproduced. At one point I got home, put my copy on the PlayStation 4, sat down and put my feet up in front of the TV, headphones on and thought I'm just going to play it. I sat down, and after about four hours straight, you take the headphones off thinking you need a break, and you actually kind of miss the voices. You do. It's like they're still there, but in a negative sense."

We agreed we had a similar feeling, having spent so much of the game trying to decipher the intention of these spirits in Senua's mind, when they went silent we felt their absence. "I totally didn't get that through developing the game, because you just don't sit down and play it for a long enough period of time," he adds. "You're almost kind of double-guessing yourself, in what you're trying to do versus what it's trying to imply that you're doing, versus what it knows about what you're doing."

HOW THE SECRETS OF HELLBLADE'S SUCCESS WERE IN THE EYES

→ TECHNICAL DIRECTOR ANDREW VIDLER REFLECTS ON THE MAKING OF SENUA'S SACRIFICE AND THE REACTION TO THAT TWIST

FORMAT: **PS4, PC** | PUBLISHER: **NINJA THEORY** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **OUT NOW** | PLAYERS: **1**

One of our most discussed games of 2017 has been *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. Its depiction of psychosis and how it used first-hand stories of mental illness to build a game that could give players some sense of that experience was like nothing else that has come before. On top of that, developer Ninja Theory managed to create a breathtaking world, and one of the most engaging and believable heroes of a story we've seen this generation. Senua came alive on the screen, in part thanks to the performance of actress Melina Juergens, and also in large part thanks to the technical work behind the scenes to capture that performance and translate it into a controllable and interactive character.

At the BFX Festival in Bournemouth, technical director Andrew Vidler revealed details of how Senua was created, from how Juergens was captured in studio, to how they animated and wrote the code for dictating her movement in-game. Afterwards, we sat down with Vidler to discuss some of the details further.

When we played *Hellblade*, one of the elements that we spent a lot of time marvelling at was how you captured Senua's eye movement. Can you tell us a little about how you did that?

The eye movement for Senua was captured along with the facial setup. We had two cameras pointing at the face and some software made by Cubic Motion that essentially tracks facial features, which they then solve towards morph targets or blend shapes that we use in the engine. But that software also drives the eyeball joints so it can tell where you're looking even if your eyes are closed. Your cornea raises your eyeball behind your eyelids. It's basically all down to recording actually where Mel [Melina Juergens, the actress playing Senua] was looking during the performance, which is why it looks so realistic, because it's actually where she's looking.

Are we right in thinking that most of the capturing was done in-house as well?

Most of the motion capture was done in our board room with a camera setup there. It was set up with a load of cameras on IKEA poles, just screwed into the roof [laughs]. That's basically it. We've got a few computers down at the end, some flooring down so that the floor is not too hard and we can also mark it up with tape so you know where the camera shots are, or where the actors should stand. There was some stunt work done at an external studio.

> "IT WAS SET UP WITH A LOAD OF CAMERAS ON IKEA POLES, JUST SCREWED INTO THE ROOF"
> ANDREW VIDLER, NINJA THEORY

We understand you've played around with VR a little. Have you used it as a tool for developing at all, perhaps to visualise 3D models?

Kind of. One of the experiments we've done is matching up of VR and setup the Vive to a motion capture stage so you can have a live-driven motion captured performance that you can then fire over, once it's solved, in real time to the Vive, so you can have Mel in a motion capture suit in real-time playing Senua, and you can see it in the Vive. The freaky thing about that is that you're never used to being in the Vive and actually being able to touch things, or things touching you. We had a setup where you get someone in the Vive and then Mel comes out, and they don't really know she's in the room as well, they just think it's a VR demo. And then she'll go over and actually touch them and they'll completely freak out [laughs]. So, yeah, I think there are some interesting things that can be done along those lines. I'm slightly cooler on the idea of using VR with a toolset in it to make a landscape or to model something. I've seen people do really good stuff in it, but it's not clear to me that it's fundamentally better, as such, for that kind of stuff.

We should ask you about the whole issue of your save game being lost in *Hellblade* if you die too many times…

Although it doesn't actually say that [laughs].

Exactly, although that's the way it was interpreted. We played the final battle for about 20 minutes longer than was really necessary.

As most people probably did.

But it was very effective in making us feel more attached to Senua. What was the reaction within Ninja Theory to the feedback, positive and negative, that came from that?

Well, handling feedback is an interesting one because you don't want to look at the negative feedback and say "Those people don't know what they're talking about," because it's their opinion. But, at the same time, you have to go with what you agree with and what you don't agree with. There were definitely, I think, things to look at and improve on, like graphics and interaction, and various aspects of future games. One of the things that comes to mind in terms of the feedback that we got was I remember people talking about exactly the thing you mentioned, the game erasing the save, that all progress will be lost if you die too many times, and someone said, "I bet it's not real," on Reddit or something, "I bet the developers are just sitting there laughing at us," [Laughs]. Laughing at is a bit pejorative, but it was kind of amusing in a way [laughs].

HOW THE ORIGINAL XBOX CLASSICS FILL THE GAPS ON XBOX ONE X

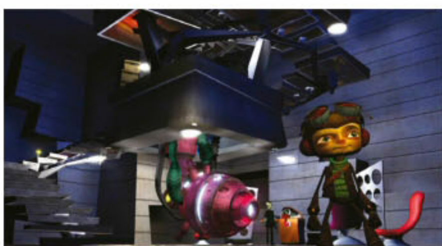
→ THESE NEW BACKWARDS COMPATIBLE TITLES REALLY HELP TO FLESH OUT YOUR OPTIONS

IN BRIEF
Ahead of the launch of the Xbox One X, Microsoft made 13 original Xbox games playable on Xbox One, extending its backwards compatibility



STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

1 We've had a smattering of sci-fi RPGs so far this generation, but nothing quite on the level of Bioware's classic from the Xbox era. As with all of the original Xbox game upscaling on Xbox One, *KOTOR* is looking crisp and sharp around the edges these days, which makes it a joy to revisit on the modern console. Some of the mechanics have dated a little, but it's still one of the all-time great Star Wars games and there's nothing else like it on the system.



PSYCHONAUTS

2 The 3D platformer has made a welcome return in recent years, but while *Yooka-Laylee* offers its fun and *Super Lucky's Tale* has its charms, neither really offer the insanity and engagement of Double Fine's classic. *Psychonauts* will be getting a sequel sometime in the near future, but in the mean time this one is looking as fresh and enjoyable to play as ever. Games with a sense of humour like this one were mainstays of the original Xbox.



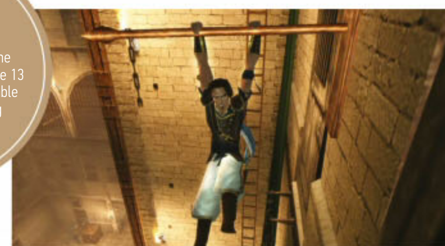
NINJA GAIDEN BLACK

3 While the PS4 has had *Nioh* to enjoy as far as Japanese-influenced action brawlers are concerned, Xbox has gone a little dark on the Ninja Gaiden series since its last outing on the Xbox 360. But that's no great concern anymore thanks to *Ninja Gaiden Black*, because this game still holds up incredibly well. It remains a punishing experience, but the action flows as nicely as ever and should be up your street if you haven't tried it before but really love the challenge of *Dark Souls*.



CRIMSON SKIES: HIGH ROAD TO REVENGE

4 The Xbox One launched with *Crimson Dragon*, which was a resurrection of sorts for *Panzer Dragoon* in all but name, but while that flight combat experience was one thing, the arcade shooter action of *Crimson Skies* cannot be matched. We're not even sure that the last generation had a game that could stand up to this original Xbox release, and like the rest it looks as good as ever (better even) on the Xbox One thanks to its upscaling.



PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

5 It's a shame that the Prince Of Persia series complicated itself so terribly in the last generation, because playing *The Sands Of Time* is evidence that the original 3D POP formula was more or less perfect. If you've learned your parkour platforming from the Assassin's Creed games then you may need some time to get used to the more involved and demanding mechanics here, but once you master them it's incredibly satisfying to leap and swing around this brilliant game.



FUZION FRENZY

6 We're probably all too quick to dismiss party games, but we have to say as silly as *Fuzion Frenzy* can appear (and often is), it's a hell of a lot of fun to play with friends. And there really isn't a party game like it already on the Xbox One, which is surprising. At every Xbox event we've seen recently where this was available, people were leaping into the action and having a whale of a time with its selection of competitive challenges. This is not an Xbox original to be dismissed.

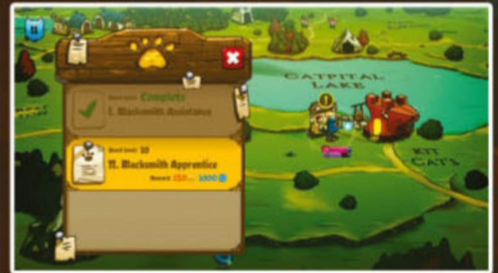
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WHY I ♥...

QUAKE III ARENA

ANDREW VIDLER, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR, NINJA THEORY

"A game that I really love? I'm going to go for the original Quake III, *because I spent most of my university years playing it, and I still think it's probably the pinnacle of first person shooters.*

It's just the balance of the game, apart from the BFG, but just overall the balance and just everything about it is spot on.

In certain ways it guided me towards to what I started to do in the games industry, which was as a graphics programmer, because it was one of the first games to use shaders rather than have a software rasterizer. I might be wrong about that, but I think it was. It's a long time ago now [laughs]."

"I still think it's probably the pinnacle of first-person shooters"

ANDREW VIDLER, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR, NINJA THEORY



ONLY HUMAN

QUANTIC DREAM CERTAINLY HAS A WAY OF STIRRING CONVERSATION. WITH THE INDUSTRY ONCE AGAIN LOCKED IN DISCUSSION AROUND **DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN**, ITS STORY AND ITS THEMES, OPINION IS CERTAINLY DIVIDED ON WHAT IT IS TRYING TO SAY AND ACHIEVE. WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE BEST IF WE SAT DOWN WITH DIRECTOR DAVID CAGE AND WENT HANDS-ON WITH HIS UPCOMING WORK OF INTERACTIVE FICTION, ALL IN AN EFFORT TO SEE IF WE COULD MAKE SENSE OF THE VARIOUS PIECES OF THIS PUZZLE AS IT SLOWLY STARTS TO COME TOGETHER



"MY WILDEST DREAM WOULD BE THAT PEOPLE REMEMBER *DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN*; THAT IT WILL LEAVE SOMETHING IN YOU THAT YOU WILL remember for a long time. Much like the best films that you've seen or the best books that you've read, they become a part of you and a part of your personal culture," says David Cage, founder of French development outfit Quantic Dream and the director, writer and producer of *Detroit: Become Human*. "For me, as a creator, that's the biggest reward you can get," he pauses, contemplatively. "To have one, *just one*, of the games in your care reach that level… I really hope that *Detroit* will have that chance."

Quantic Dream has been attempting to alter the landscape of the videogame industry for two decades. That's 20 years of trying to refine the language surrounding videogame creation and consumption, of redefining the way in which a story can be told through the medium and still be considered truly interactive. The studio hasn't always been successful in its endeavour to push videogames to a higher cultural plane; Quantic Dream and its enigmatic leaders – David Cage and Guillaume De Fondaumière – have often been cast as divisive figures, their games skirting conventional genre definition and accolades every step of the way. But their resolve to deliver cinematic, evocative and shapeable storytelling – without diluting the very essence of what it means to be interactive entertainment – has been, if nothing else, laudable.

Detroit: Become Human might not be the boldest game in the studio's library to date – traditionally, Cage has had a tendency »



to take his concepts, writing and direction to some pretty wild places, leaving *Detroit* looking positively tame by comparison – but it certainly is its most immediately impressive. The game's visual fidelity has one foot firmly planted in the uncanny valley, its themes fine-tuned to the resurgence of a particular style of science-fiction.

This is a narrative adventure framed around a near-future Detroit, ushering us into an era in which androids have been forced to take on humanity's most menial tasks. CyberLife, the largest distributor of androids, convinces the populous that its replicants are safe, under control and built to serve. They are, of course, widely adopted – we're a lazy bunch, after all. It's a fantasy that we can all easily envision becoming a reality, can see just off in the distance; it's as exciting as it is terrifying, a mixture of emotion Cage is hoping to harness here in *Detroit*.

"Technology has evolved to the point where humanoid androids are really commonplace… but the rule that we gave to ourselves was to imagine the world 20 years from now. We didn't want to create anything that doesn't exist today, at least in a lab somewhere," considers Cage, his flair for the dramatic as prevalent as ever. "We wanted a very realistic setting in Detroit, because we wanted the player to connect to the world. I don't think the world 20 years from now will be completely different… that's what we wanted to preserve," he continues, teasing that the dichotomy created between the sheen of new technology against the stark decay of our old, much more recognisable world will be one of the ways in which we are able to connect to Detroit and the plight of the various characters caught up in its whirlwind of conflict points.

IT'S REALLY A NARRATIVE RUBIK'S CUBE, WHEN EACH TIME YOU MOVE SOMETHING IT MIGHT BREAK SOMETHING ELSE

Of course, drama is at the heart of the experience. *Detroit* is centred around a small group of androids that discover sentience, and begin displaying human-like emotional responses that violate their core directives; we will see fear and resentment begin to spread throughout society, and ultimately have the agency to shape or deter that as we see fit.

Looking at the overarching narrative, it's familiar: one that so obviously has its roots in science-fiction born out of the Fifties. Isaac Asimov famously imagined a future in which sentient droids are built to serve and protect, only for them to end up rebelling against their creators. Cage has taken these classic science fiction tropes and blended them with more modern think-pieces, such as Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity Is Near*, in which the author theorises that the rate at which human intelligence develops pales in comparison to that of a machine. In combining elements such as these, Cage has landed on the basic premise for *Detroit*. Of course, where this experience differs from that of the aforementioned written works is that we will have agency over what happens to the three central android characters, and the conclusions it draws upon *should* be more poignant because of it. "The idea behind it," suggests Cage, was to "create an experience in itself that is meaningful, and that would resonate with us as individuals, as citizens, as human beings."

In *Detroit*, the studio wants to deliver a videogame that can truly penetrate the public consciousness and tear down the barriers that many believe are still erected around the medium, that continue to separate it from the heart and minds of other works that have impacted popular culture.

We've had a number of hours with the game, and been treated to seeing a variety of extra scenes from behind closed doors. What's clear already is that this is a layered and intricate work that sees story and gameplay intertwined in such a fashion that neither proficiency is sacrificed to the altar of the other. Is the industry more willing to embrace Quantic Dream's vision for the future of gaming now than it was when it first set out on this journey all those years ago? It's difficult to say for certain, though Cage is confident that it has helped usher in the foundation for broader conversation and experiences around videogames.

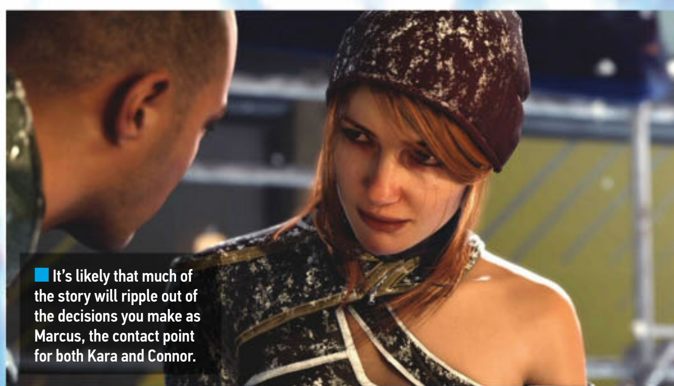
"When we started talking about emotions in games for *Fahrenheit* (2005), and then later with *Heavy Rain* (2010), many people would ask me, 'Well, who needs emotions in a game? That's not what we want; we want guns, we want cars, we don't need emotions'. But now nobody asks me that question. Everybody is happy to see emotions in games, and they realise that it only makes the game even better. That's something that we are proud to have been a part of. We've learned a lot about ourselves in trying to push the envelope; in exploring new grounds and trying different things in game after game to see how we can do something better. That's what we really try to do here," Cage notes, aware that there is still plenty of work to be done on this front. "It's still a discovery process for me as a writer and for the studio. And sometimes for players as well, as they [continue] to get used to the kinds of games that we make."

While the popularity of Dontnod's *Life Is Strange* and Telltale's various adventures have certainly helped popularise videogames that have emotion and player-driven decision »

Played by actor Jesse Williams, Marcus is where Quantic Dream plans on flexing its flair for cinematic action. It's through Marcus that we will have the opportunity to start an uprising, release androids from their core programming and begin to amass an army.

Marcus makes for an unlikely leader of an underground revolution, but it's his scenes that will need to be deftly navigated. Whether you turn to violence or pacifism will have a huge effect on how the world responds to your plight, and violence only begets more violence.





It's likely that much of the story will ripple out of the decisions you make as Marcus, the contact point for both Kara and Connor.

20 YEARS OF QUANTIC DREAM

THE GAMES THAT HELPED THIS EXPERIMENTAL DEVELOPMENT STUDIO CELEBRATE AN IMPORTANT MILESTONE



OMIKRON: THE NOMAD SOUL

1999

Omikron was a debut that established Quantic Dream and David Cage's flair for the weird and wonderful. Praised upon release for its vibrant game world and eclectic mixture of gameplay styles, it's most typically remembered for featuring both original music and the digital presence of David Bowie.



FAHRENHEIT

2005

The studio's first attempt at an interactive, cinematic adventure game, *Fahrenheit* (*Indigo Prophecy* in the US) was an interesting experiment that didn't quite hit the mark. The story was deep and thoughtful, although it quickly ran the rails as Cage pushed it from intense murder-mystery and into the realms of science-fiction nonsense.



HEAVY RAIN

2010

Taking the split-screen presentation, the branching narrative and the QTE-heavy combat the studio established in *Fahrenheit*, things went to an all-new level in *Heavy Rain*. An interactive drama that pulled multiple playable protagonists into a hunt for a dangerous serial killer; a truly landmark moment for cinematically driven videogames.



BEYOND: TWO SOULS

2013

State-of-the-art motion and face capture couldn't save this polarising interactive drama. *Beyond* is perhaps the most divisive game in the studio's history, with players caught between appreciating the work of Ellen Page and Willem Dafoe, and left grappling with the often aggressively unintuitive controls.



Much like every other playable character in the game, you'll be able to help Kara manoeuvre through difficult situations via a blend of quick-time events and reaction-based movements.







making at their heart, Quantic Dream's output is still met with trepidation from many in the gaming community – perhaps more so than Cage is willing to believe or accept. Quantic Dream delivers videogames that divide opinion, that much is true. And *Detroit* is no different; it's cut from the same cloth as *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls*, a work of interactive fiction that puts its full weight behind the decisions you make, and is guaranteed to draw ire for its stripped-back control system and heavy usage of quick-time events to govern everything from movement and dialogue to action.

But what you lose in freedom of control, you gain elsewhere. Every decision you make in *Detroit*, no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential, has an impact on the story – be it immediately reflected in the scene that you are caught up in, or the story as a whole. Consequence is at the core of *Detroit*, it shapes the characters and summons the emotion that tethers the experience together. As *Detroit* reaches its eventual conclusion, you should expect to look back on your time with it and see a rich tapestry of mistakes and decisions worth making.

You don't find merely yourself navigating scenes as a player, but truly find yourself cast as the actor, writer and, perhaps most importantly, the director of the experience. While this is true of every Quantic Dream game, we get the impression that the studio is more capable of pulling your decisions together into one cohesive whole better than ever before – the experienced executive producer there to oversee production and ensure it all comes together in the end.

WE DON'T JUST TELL THREE STORIES [IN ISOLATION], WE TELL YOU ONE FROM THREE DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW

And we say 'we get the impression' here, because it's very difficult to get a real sense of what *Detroit is* and what it can offer. It is, in actuality, almost impossible. It almost doesn't matter how much of the game we are all shown ahead of release. Each and every scene offers a different gameplay experience and opportunity to change the direction of the story; *Detroit* provides more branching pathways than anything in the studio's history, it could never conceivably (or reasonably) demonstrate all of them to us. But we *are* able to get a sense of the general setup; able to see all three playable protagonists in action, get a feel for how their stories will intertwine, and do our best to relay that information to you as you look to make a purchasing decision.



Kara is a common android model in this world. An all-purpose machine designed for house work and stewardship. Will it be this that allows her to pass through the world so easily undetected?

The most important piece of the puzzle is the characters. Without good characters – without believable personalities and clear motivations – you struggle to create the emotional bonds necessary to make this style of game work, look to *Beyond* as proof of that. So here's what we will say: they may well be androids, but these starring three characters are perhaps the clearest leads Quantic Dream has ever brought to life.

"In the past two years, we've introduced you to two characters. Connor, the detective who is working with the police force to investigate deviant androids and then, at this year's E3, we introduced Marcus, a character who has joined up with a group of deviants and is leading the android revolution," teases Guillaume de Fondaumière, co-founder and CFO of Quantic Dream, who has also served as the executive producer presiding over *Fahrenheit*, *Heavy Rain*, *Beyond: Two Souls* and now *Detroit: Become Human*. "Now, I am able to present a character who you have known for a long of time, because her name is Kara. Back in 2012 we created a short movie called *Kara*," he continues, referencing the awe-inspiring technical demonstration designed to showcase the studio's new game



Valorie Curry is reprising her role as Kara in *Detroit: Become Human* after making her videogame debut in the 2012 tech demo named after the character. It was Curry's presence, and the nuance she brought to the role, that helped shape much of the early world-building and story of the game we see today.

engine for the PlayStation 3. "Back in the day, we didn't have a clue what would happen to Kara after she left that factory where she was being built, but it's now a few years later, and we have built a whole game around her, so to speak."

KARA'S BIG RE-REVEAL CAME IN THE FORM OF A DEMONSTRATION ENTITLED STORMY NIGHT. IT'S A SCENE YOU'LL LIKELY BE FAMILIAR WITH BY NOW BECAUSE, ROBBED OF ITS CONTEXT, it looked out of place with everything else that we've seen of the game thus far. Marcus will be our gateway into the plight of the sentient android, giving us the option to free other machines and mould an underground movement for robotic rights and freedoms; Connor is an android in service to Detroit's law enforcement, a Phillip K Dick-inspired *Blade Runner*-type who is tasked with hunting down 'deviant' androids that have violated their core directives – putting humans in harm's way, expressing an emotion in public, or having gotten their hands on anything close to a weapon. It's easy to imagine how these two playable characters will come into contact, from where that conflict will stem, and what paths we might be head down together. But Kara's scene felt isolated from the grander science fiction. It was grittier, wrapped up in very human conflict points.

Fondaumière describes Kara's role as that of a common android model, "One that people can buy freely in a CyberLife shop and use at homes for different tasks," he says, noting, "You are kind of like a maid and a nanny at the same time." While the Stormy Night scene won't be the first to feature Kara in the final game – we will already be familiar with her personality, role, surroundings and predicament by the time this scene plays out in our living rooms – it is the beginning of her journey and her awakening to the realities of the world.

Caught in a cycle of domestic abuse, Kara is given the opportunity to break free of her core directives – she shatters her 'mind palace' (don't ask) and has the option of attempting to save Alice, a little girl, who is routinely abused by her junkie father. It's a lot to take in. We've seen this scene play out in two different configurations, and it never got any easier to watch or engage with. It's powerful and affecting, but it's also effective – it's tense and commanding of your attention. It's easy to see why Cage may have settled on such adult and difficult scenes to establish the parameters of motivation that drive Kara's character.

The discussion isn't – and shouldn't be – on whether the medium of videogames have matured to the point in which the depiction of such serious and adult material should be displayed (we would argue that it absolutely has), but rather whether it is handled sensitively and with care. While we can't speak



to all eventualities of the scene, the two we've seen are well-acted and directed. Having to use a variety of reactionary button presses to save a child from being beaten with a belt or the successful completion of quick-time events to push off an attacker may indeed seem a little crass, but this is the price Quantic Dream has paid for its cinematic action and presentation. Ultimately, as a scene from a much larger story, it's a loud statement of intent for the breadth of experiences and struggles these characters will encounter throughout *Detroit*, particularly when you consider that – much like in *Heavy Rain* – it's possible to cut a story short entirely through mistakes and indecision.

"This [scene] is certainly going to have dramatic consequences on [Kara], and she may not have survived the scene. All characters in the game can die," Fondaumière assures us. "Depending on your choices, you are going to have a story that is very, very different. In this particular scene, Kara can die, and this is the end of this character, and then you'll continue probably with the others… I hope that we've been able to highlight how bending the experience is, and how player choice and how your decisions are going to impact the story – in this and in all of the other scenes in the game."

I'M REALLY STRESSED RIGHT NOW. FOCUSED ON ALL OF THE ISSUES AND ALL OF THE THINGS WE WANT TO SOLVE

Quite honestly, it has done. Kara has an integral role to play in *Detroit*, taking Alice under her wing should you both make it out of the house alive. As Marcus you'll have the opportunity to shape the way in which the android revolution is formed, and the way in which humanity perceives such an act; violence or pacifism, the choice is yours although either will have a ripple effect. As for Connor, the scene of his that we've played time and time again, the daring hostage negotiation that has been publicly demonstrated so many times in the last 12 months, offers a variety of hints as to how the story can be shaped by you – do your job efficiently, or push beyond the laws that you are programmed to uphold and suffer the consequences, whatever they may be. "It's interesting because we don't just tell three stories [in isolation], we tell you one from three different points of view. These characters are very different personalities and have very different roles in the world," suggests Cage. "For example, Connor, he helps the humans, so he is on the other side; it becomes very interesting to play on both sides, and you come to understand both points of view. It's the kind of thing that you love to play with when you have three stories with three characters, it's really enjoyable to see it in action."

Unlike *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond*, which often left us wondering what impact the road not taken could have on our journey, *Detroit* will actually lay all of its decisions out in front of you at the conclusion of a scene. Fondaumière calls it a "tree of choices" and hints that "you are going to see, not only the choices that you've made, but the great many choices that you *could* have unlocked. This is a very useful tool for the player to know exactly what they could have done differently in a scene; when you decide to either replay a scene or replay the whole game you'll have the possibility to see what your choices have been and to try something else."

The introduction of this system has given us a great deal of insight into just how deeply committed *Detroit* is to being

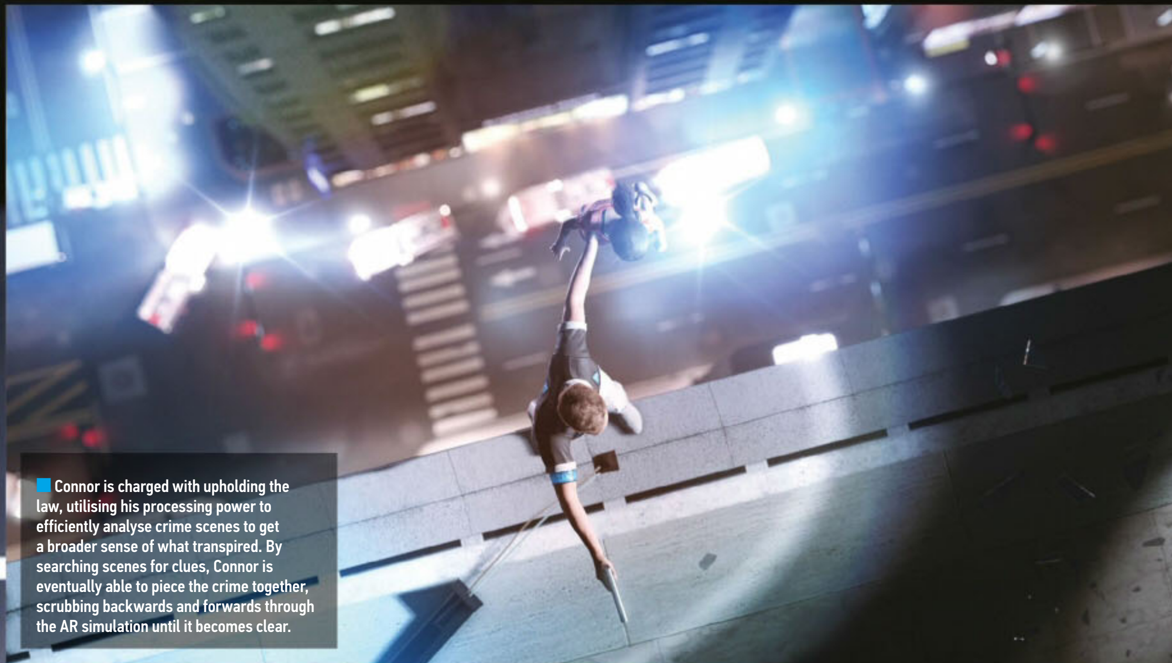
■ If you've seen *Blade Runner 2049*, you'll recognise Connor's character pretty quickly, as it draws a pretty direct parallel with the mission and societal struggles that Officer K faces.

DEVELOPMENT HELL

■ Back in 2013, just ahead of the release of *Beyond: Two Souls*, David Cage penned an editorial for **games™** in which he claimed that each videogame project is made up of four nightmares. The anxiety of the blank page in the writing process was the first, the second the realities of attempting to shoot such a large story, with so many actors, on set across a year. The third was in assembling all of the pieces of the puzzle together and trying to make sense of them, while the fourth was sitting in anticipation of its critical and commercial reception. It's an interesting piece, and we were intrigued to see if, given the years of experience Cage has under his belt, whether it ever gets any easier with time. It does not.

"It's always the same; excitement and, I would say, stress," he laughs, with development of *Detroit* straddling nightmare three and four as you read this. "I'm really stressed right now. We are in the last phase of development and your mind is always full of problems and issues; there are bugs to solve and then there are things that you want to change. That's really where my mindset is. But it's been great; we've been really happy to see the response to everything that we've shown so far from *Detroit*. I'm very happy to see the response also from the playable demo, because the question with the games that we make is always: 'Oh, how does it play?' We spent *years* trying to explain *Heavy Rain*, trying to explain *Beyond*. This time, with Connor's Hostage Negotiation demo, we just showed the scene to people and said, fine, you play it. And I don't get any questions about the gameplay anymore, because people have tested it. That was definitely a relief, and I'm very happy about that. Now, we are focused on all of the issues and all of the things we want to solve. I'm more nervous than anything."





Connor is charged with upholding the law, utilising his processing power to efficiently analyse crime scenes to get a broader sense of what transpired. By searching scenes for clues, Connor is eventually able to piece the crime together, scrubbing backwards and forwards through the AR simulation until it becomes clear.

Bryan Dechart will take on the role of Connor, an android charged with assisting the Detroit police department in hunting down and neutralising 'deviant' machines. Connor is thrust into some tense situations, often taking on the role of negotiator or mediator in highly volatile and tense situations.





It seems fairly clear that Connor will eventually be charged with hunting Kara and Marcus down, both of who are CyberLife property that have gained sentience and gone rogue.

your story, but has also summoned its own degree of concerns. Cage, for everything he does so well, is known for writing to the strength of specific scenes – of sometimes ignoring the wider implications of decisions made as the narrative threads begin to weave together. How is he possibly going to handle something so dense and so complex?

Cage explains that he sees this process as something of a puzzle for both him and the team at Quantic Dream, tasked with translating his script (thousands of pages long) into a functioning videogame. "It's really a narrative Rubik's Cube, when each time you move something it might break something else. [We] try to solve that," he teases, mimicking the twisting array of options the cube presents in the air in front of us.

It's the challenge of making this work that seems to excite Cage the most, and his enthusiasm is infectious. Everything we've seen and played of *Detroit* thus far seems to invite more intrigue and interest. It's this depth and complexity in the decision system, Cage suggests, that makes *Detroit* so special. "I have worked for quite a long time on this game. To write it, I worked with charts dealing with variables, I had huge notes – I mean, I had five or six thousand pages of notes – so I did my best to make sure I didn't miss anything," he says, laughing. "And it's a tricky thing… we want this system to be totally transparent to the player; we don't want to give them a feeling of going through a tunnel, of do you want the left tunnel or the right tunnel? You really want them to be there, in the moment, and say, 'Oh my god, this thing just happened. What am I going to do?' The player wants the feeling that they are totally free and that their actions matter."

This has been, as a process, something Cage describes as increasingly challenging throughout production – a puzzle that is quite unique to interactive entertainment, one that helps set this work apart from other mediums. "It starts easy and then ends up being very complicated, because then you need to start dealing with the consequences, of the consequences, of the consequences."

"As an interactive writer, I have all of these options on the table and I say, 'Okay, I'm going to develop them all'. I see the clear branches of the story and just make sure that the player has clear choices and they understand how it is going to have impact."

What Quantic Dream, and indeed Cage himself, says and does is often conflated. Despite being highly emotionally charged and, seemingly, more politically relevant than perhaps anticipated, there's a lot riding on *Detroit* and the way in which it executes its themes and characters. That said, given everything the game is looking to say, Cage still maintains that he doesn't have a specific agenda or message to impart upon the player. Instead, he is aware of the parallels that can be drawn from his work to struggles that exist in the real world, but has simply established the sandbox in which you may explore them. The message that you draw from *Detroit* is yours to explore and uncover, and how you choose to do so – perhaps more so than in any choice-driven adventure before it – really is down to you and the decisions that you make along the way. "I didn't write this game to deliver a message," he says, picking his words carefully. "I wanted to create a very emotional experience, and I want the player to feel something in *Detroit* – that's my goal as a creator. Different people will see different things in this game, and I'm totally happy about that. That's the nature of the beast, and I think it's great."





THE GAMES OF 2017

The 25 gaming experiences that shaped and defined an incredible year

It has been one hell of a year, hasn't it? Compiling a succinct list of what we consider to be the games of the year is never easy, but it felt particularly difficult this time around. But here we are all the same, with the 25 best experiences from the past 12 months; the games that we found to be the most entertaining and compelling, the ones that we truly believe will impact and influence the industry in the months and years to come. It's always important to reflect; it invites the opportunity to revel in the good times and gain a new perspective on what lies ahead. Here, we present our 25 best games of the year, ordered with respect to how much we enjoyed them, but also how important we think they will be when we all look back at the kind of year 2017 has been for games.







PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS FORCES A NOTE FROM THE EDITORIAL TEAM

Released: Early Access **Developer:** In-house **Publisher:** Bluehole **Format:** PC, Xbox One

■ **games™** isn't in the business of handing out honourable mentions. It has taken the editorial team hours of discussion (and arguments; oh so many arguments) to whittle such an incredible year of interactive entertainment down to just 25 entries. As a rule, to be considered a 'Game Of The Year' contender, the title in question needs to be available for purchase and play independent of any other release, and the full game needs to have actually been released. This metric has served us well in the past, but in 2017 doing so would be simply ridiculous; it would mean ignoring one of this year's best and most unexpected experiences: *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*.

It's still in Early Access, and has had its share of problems, but it is virtually impossible to look back over this year and ignore the ascent of the Battle Royal. Again, the Game Of The Year isn't (and should never be) dictated by popularity, but it's clear for all to see that *PUBG* could indeed be one the most influential games of the decade. It's simple to understand and difficult to master; a game in which success isn't connected directly to individual player ability, but in measuring tactics, movement and options on an ever-shifting plane of play – instances of victory stolen in the seconds between indecision.

With 100 players parachuting onto a sprawling map full of easily identifiable points of interest, it's the decisions you make along the way that dictate whether you survive or die; items and weapons are procured on site, and success is never assured. Despite the performance problems, the problematic physics system and somewhat lifeless art direction, *PUBG captured* the attention of the industry almost immediately. Its capacity for generating highly entertaining player-driven storytelling is essentially unrivalled; its ability to spawn highly personal and varied game experiences between each and every game impossibly impressive.

As Bluehole works diligently to resolve lingering friction points in its engine and design, and introduce new core game mechanics, maps and items to the game ahead of its final release build, the future looks really bright for *PUBG*. Would it be presumptuous of us to call our GOTY for 2018 already? Perhaps, but if *PUBG* is able to continue to entice, influence and engage both the development and gaming communities as it has done in the last ten months then the conversation will be short lived.













XCOM II: WAR OF THE CHOSEN

■ Last year's *XCOM II* was a truly brilliant turned-based tactical experience, expanding and improving on almost every aspect of its predecessor. While we didn't think it could get any better, Firaxis Games went ahead and did it anyway, delivering one of best DLC expansion packs we've seen in quite some time. *War Of The Chosen* delivers so much content and offers so much pure delight that it could very well have been released as a standalone experience, with its suite of new systems, characters, unique weapons and combat situations proving that *XCOM II* is one of the most versatile genre games ever released. The Chosen, the starring villains of the experience, are a total pain in the arse, and yet so damned fun to engage with that they enhance almost every aspect of the base game. *War Of The Chosen* also introduces a horde-like mode in which your squad is tasked with fending off waves of The Lost, zombified creatures that add yet another flavour and pace to the overall experience. 2017 has been light on truly standout DLC expansions, but *War Of The Chosen* is special in its own right. If you didn't already have enough games vying for your attention in 2017, try to find the time to go back to *XCOM II* with *War Of The Chosen*. You won't regret it.





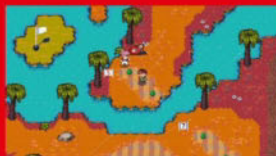
25 PERSONA 5

Suave, sophisticated and stylish as all hell, *Persona 5* was met with critical and commercial success as it finally landed on Western shores in 2017. With a phenomenal original score and soundtrack, a scintillating UI and graphical presentation, and a deep array of distractions to hold your attention, Atlus delivered a landmark J-RPG.



24 GOLF STORY

Sidebar Games melded traditional RPG elements with the simple joys of a round of golf. The classic three-click system of swing and power management feels sharp to wield in lieu of combat, while the heartfelt story and gorgeous graphics will keep you coming back for more.



23 PROJECT CARS 2

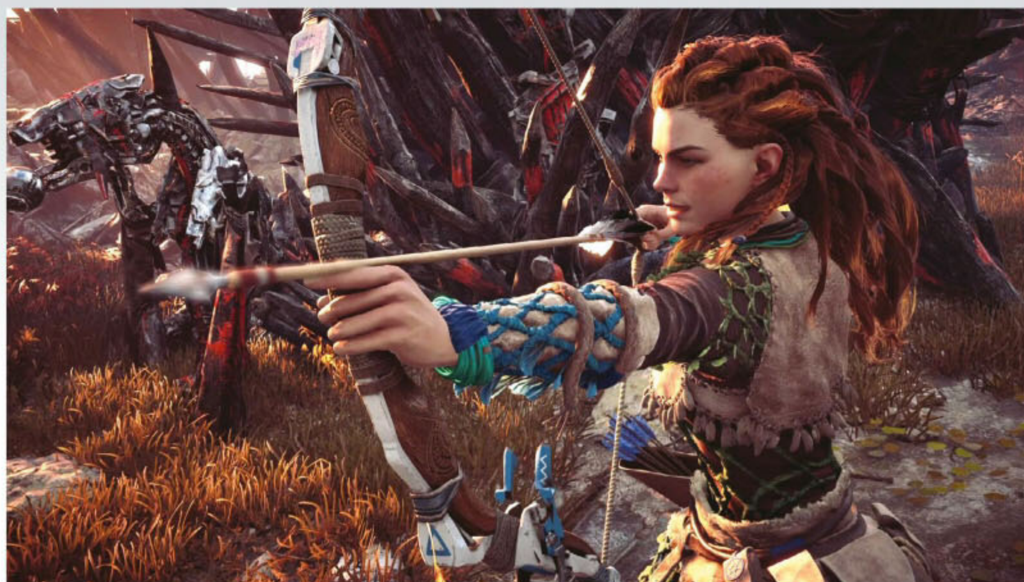
Project Cars 2 refined and streamlined the simulation racer. In doing so, Slightly Mad Studios has not only overtaken Turn 10 and Polyphony Digital in the race for pole position, but made *Forza Motorsport* and *Gran Turismo* feel archaic and slow to adapt to the shifting tastes of players and the evolution of the technology that drives these games forward.

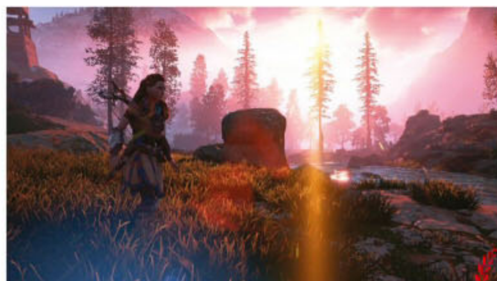


22 MARIO + RABBIDS: KINGDOM BATTLE

Nintendo and Ubisoft's respective mascots, locked in battle? It should have been a match made in hell, but there's a very pure joy to be found in the execution; the depth and nuance of *XCOM*'s core gameplay loop colliding with the visuals and charm of the Mario and Raving Rabbids franchises.









5

HOW **HORIZON ZERO DAWN** FOUND THE SOLUTION TO GLUTTONOUS OPEN-WORLD GAME DESIGN

Released: 1 March 2017 **Developer:** Guerrilla Games **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Format:** PS4

Admit it, we were all feeling it; the open world design template had, in its previous form, reached its inevitable conclusion. In the previous generation, the open world action-adventure game was a testament to the rampant advancement of design techniques, developer ingenuity and the technology that exists behind the polygons. But of late it had begun to feel laboured; as if the games were underpinned by a perpetual desire to engage us in busy-work masquerading as exciting and innovative play, templated releases that sought to decimate all of your time to check off a laundry list of objectives – tired gameplay mechanics left to rot in our hands, supported by systems that had failed to evolve with the size of the worlds we were left to inhabit.

And then *Horizon Zero Dawn* arrived. Guerrilla Games made the unquestionably bold move of leaving the FPS behind – a genre it had established its entire identity around – and firmly pushed into the action-RPG space. Many believed it would never work, that the studio lacked the expertise to ever innovate in such a congested genre. And yet, here we are, with *Horizon* proving that there is life in this type of behemoth-sized, time-consuming open-world space after all.

Horizon Zero Dawn works because it is aware of what it is and what it wants to achieve. It is expertly paced – near perfect in this respect. Barely an hour can pass without it bringing your attention to something new – be it an environment, ability, weapon, tribe or prehistoric machine to do battle against. It constantly strives to open itself up to you; the more of your time that you are willing to share with *Horizon*, the more it is willing to share its wonders and mysteries.

This is unquestionably Guerrilla's greatest achievement. It is indeed a technical marvel, one of the most exquisitely crafted and beautiful games on the PlayStation 4 – but we had expected that to be the case. Say what you will about *Killzone*, but the shooters sure knew how to leverage the power of a system to produce the best in class performance and visuals. *Horizon* goes a step further, delivering an open world that felt exhilarating to explore; critical missions and side-quests that felt as if they justified their place in the story and world, and surprisingly deep combat and crafting systems that ensured the core-loop never grew stale. *Horizon Zero Dawn* leveraged spectacle to draw your attention, but it's the game's sublime design and attention to detail that makes it truly special.



4

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II JUST REDEFINED THE ISOMETRIC RPG

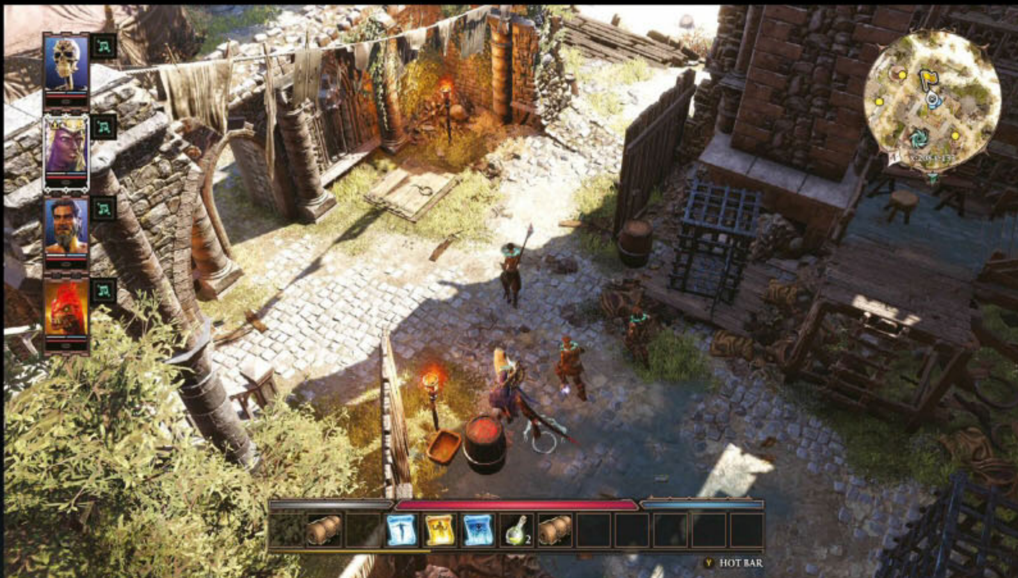
Released: 14 September 2017 **Developer:** Larian Studios **Publisher:** In-house **Format:** PC

There has been no shortage of throwback isometric RPGs in recent years. Videogames picking up where classic titles such as *Baldur's Gate* left off, those attempting to feel as if they were long-lost products of the late Nineties, unearthed and dusted off for the current generation. It's here where *Divinity: Original Sin II* sets itself apart from the crowd; it doesn't feel like a product of the past, but rather a deft continuation of the form – the inevitable result of decades of evolution and refinement.

It captures the spirit and feeling of playing a tabletop RPG with ease. Never will you find yourself questioning whether the game will let you pursue an idea, no matter how ridiculous it may indeed be. Instead, it seeks to encourage every one of your impulses, bending to your will in a way that only human-driven role-playing games could ever muster. *Original Sin II* is underpinned by an extreme degree of freedom, and that can often present itself in a thoroughly intimidating way. But therein lies its true strength, that it is never overwhelming – there's always a way to fix a mistake; you just need to get creative with the tools, items and characters developer Larian Studios puts in front of you.

Truth be told, there isn't another RPG available that lets you do so much, or encourages such opportunistic experimentation. This is a singular, centred game experience in which (seemingly) every eventuality has been accounted for; its beautiful weave of complex and immersive systems that never fails to empower your particular play style and imagination. Larian has refined almost every element and aspect of the isometric RPG, maintaining an elaborate story in a layered world with ease. It truly is an incredible achievement; an intelligent and focused RPG experience that is defined by the heart and confidence packed in to every aspect of its being.

Original Sin II is, by its very nature, a niche release, but it's also a powerful and important one. As mainstream RPGs continue to feel as if they are becoming stale portraits, Larian has delivered a stunning product that never fails to delight and surprise. It's the sort of game that will quietly see its influence spread out across the industry in the years to come, with its various elements broken apart and disseminated among the packs of contenders. It's difficult to imagine another RPG arriving with as much capability, polish and nuance as *Divinity: Original Sin II* any time soon.



21 **LAWBREAKERS**

The arena shooter found itself in vogue this year, with *LawBreakers* doing its damnedest to breathe new life into the genre. With wonderfully tight mechanics and some truly incredible map design, Boss Key Productions delivered one of the most entertaining FPS games of the year – don't let anybody tell you otherwise.



20 **TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II**

Total War: Warhammer II is a true sequel, bigger and broader than its predecessor, while still respecting the connective tissue that binds the two together. For real-time tactics and turn-based strategy, you'd be hard pressed to find a more enjoyable and lovingly crafted 2017 release.



19 **CUPHEAD**

Heavily inspired by 1930s cartoons and classic Eighties 2D fighting games, *Cuphead* is a work of art. While its subversive style helped separate Studio MDHR's debut from the pack, its the expertly constructed, inherently challenging boss battles that established it as the Xbox One's finest exclusive in 2017.



18 **ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS**

This is a true achievement in open-world game design; beautiful in presentation, while an overhaul to the core game structure and combat systems ensures that this is the first must-play *AC* game since 2013's *Black Flag*. After a decade of diminishing returns, Ubisoft Montreal proved there is still life in its flagship franchise.





PYRE

SuperGiant Games is synonymous with quality, so it's no surprise that action-RPS (role-playing sports game) *Pyre* is one of our favourites of the year. Delivering breathtaking visuals and incredibly personable characters alongside an engaging, spiritual-subversion of basketball, this is sublime.





NIER: AUTOMATA

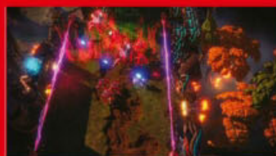
The absolute epitome of PlatinumGames; stylish and subversive in everything it attempts, it's a powerful release that uses the videogame medium to intricately explore challenging themes and deliver a layered narrative that wouldn't be possible in any other medium.





NEX MACHINA

The arcade shooter is in something of a rut, although Housemarque has once again proved that there is still life in it yet. *Nex Machina* was an impressive, tantalising twin-stick shooter cast from a top-down perspective; dazzling with its unwavering attention to detail in its level design, challenging wave-based combat and unrivalled firing mechanics.





UNCHARTED: THE LOST LEGACY

Naughty Dog proved that *Uncharted* can survive – if not thrive – without starring Nathan Drake in standalone expansion *The Lost Legacy*. The chemistry between Nadine Ross and Chloe Frazer really made the game what it was. Plus it successfully built on the series' established gameplay with more open-ended environments.







THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD FINDS SUCCESS BY RESPECTING YOUR TIME

Released: 3 March 2017 **Developer:** Nintendo EPD **Publisher:** Nintendo **Format:** Switch, Wii U

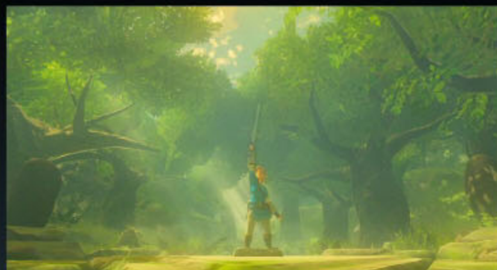
We are willing to admit it, we were a little worried about *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*. When we played slices of the game in isolation, robbed of their context, ahead of release it looked to be such a huge departure; going open-world, shedding the shackles of decades of established gameplay routines and rules, perhaps it would be too much for Nintendo to manage. As ever, 2017 has been the year in which only an idiot would second-guess Nintendo.

Breath Of The Wild was a landmark release, for Nintendo and for the industry. It immediately demonstrated that the Switch would be a capable machine, able to handle even the biggest of experiences on the couch and, more impressively, on the move too. It also proved that there was more to the open world adventure game than we had ever previously imagined, that Ubisoft, Bethesda, Warner Bros and countless others were barely scratching the surface of the type of experiences that could be delivered in these spaces.

There is so much of *Breath Of The Wild* to praise – it is, after all, truly remarkable – but we truly love how respectful it is of you, the player, and your time. This isn't a game that's concerned with disrespecting your commitment; it understands that time is precious, that you could be gaming in the stolen moments found in your daily commute or around the chaos of your home life. Consider its shrines, the small dungeons scattered across the sprawling, beautiful land of Hyrule; each of them are short, satisfying and tightly controlled – focused around one particular puzzle or item, rarely taking more than a handful of minutes to complete before releasing you back in to the wild.

That's reflective and representative of the entire game. Zelda games have, traditionally, always been incredibly well paced – gated by using item discovery as progression. Here, the game hands you all of the tools you need and leaves you to your own devices, the game opening up naturally the further you are willing to dive in and explore its mysteries. *Breath Of The Wild* never makes you feel as if you are being forced to complete an objective or find a series items for the sake of it – never will you feel the overwhelming tinge of dread and guilt that the game is wasting your time for the sake of perceived value, that your time could be better spent elsewhere; every quest and curiosity in *Breath Of The Wild* feels justified by its inclusion alone.

While *Horizon Zero Dawn* refined the monstrous open-world adventure game this year, cleaning up some of the gluttony other publishers had left behind, Nintendo took to redefining it entirely with *Breath Of The Wild*. It's a truly special game, beautiful and optimistic, fun and challenging in equal measure. A Switch system seller if there ever was one.









2

WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH BECAME TRANSFORMATIVE FOR THE INDUSTRY

Released: 25 April 2017 **Developer:** Giant Sparrow **Publisher:** Annapurna Interactive **Format:** PC, PS4, Xbox One

■ *What Remains Of Edith Finch* truly is special. It's a testament to what this maturing industry is capable of, particularly as a team of dedicated creatives work to deliver an experience that would simply be impossible to execute in any other medium. It is genuine and enlightening, heartfelt and reflective; it is further proof that gaming can deliver an experience unlike any other.

The thrust of the game is told through a series of vignettes; slices of life, small stories focused around a shifting cast of deceased characters – each of them baring the Finch family name, each of them with a tall tale just waiting to be uncovered. Edith Finch returns to her long-abandoned homestead in search of answers, the secrets locked away behind each of the bedroom doors-turned-mausoleums. Explored through beautifully delivered, captivating narration and subtle interactions, *What Remains Of Edith Finch* is able to weave together a story that never wavers from its resolve – to leave you speechless and sorrowful by its closing moments.

Each vignette is a mini-game in itself, with each introducing you to its own intuitive and unique method of control. Giant Sparrow employs somewhere in the region of 30 different control schemes throughout *Edith Finch*, and it does so without once causing any form of pause or confusion – it's frictionless. That isn't just impressive, it's downright masterful.

More impressive still is how relatable so much of the content is, particularly for any of you that have experienced loss or tragedy on the trajectory to adulthood. But herein lies its true power; *What Remains Of Edith Finch* is evocative, but not because it makes you confront death; because it asks you to first embrace life. It connects you to each one of its characters with a whisper before ripping them away again. In some instances it can be because of fantastical, almost unbelievable circumstances, yet in others it can be heart-wrenching, close to home and difficult to comprehend. The game evokes such a honest reaction from the player – resonates so clearly – because it is beautifully written and wonderfully executed in a way that so few games are able to achieve. The broad reach of the vignettes is presented in such a way that it's difficult to see any player walking away from *What Remains Of Edith Finch* without at least a pause for personal reflection.

It isn't all that often that a videogame will cause genuine pause in its player, or prompt a moment of real, reflective silence, but *What Remains Of Edith Finch* does well to establish its story, characters and boundaries. It is built in such a way that it will always find a way to connect with the person behind the controller at a very base human level. And while this narrative experience might not be for everybody, those that are willing to cast out the aspersions of what is and isn't to be considered a videogame will find something truly progressive for the medium.



13 **THIMBLEWEED PARK**

Initially designed as a spiritual successor to *Maniac Mansion*, *Thimbleweed Park* succeeded not only as a faithful homage to point-and-click adventures of old, but because it understood what made the genre so special to begin with. Smart narrative and puzzle design, fun writing and lovely visuals ensure that this will be considered a true genre classic.



12 **TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA**

Few dreamt that InXile Entertainment would be capable of delivering a true successor to 1999's *Planescape: Torment*, but here we are. It's a thought-provoking adventure cast out across a truly beautiful setting; *Tides Of Numenera*'s strength lies in its richly detailed writing and world design.



11 **DISHONORED: DEATH OF THE OUTSIDER**

With a scope decidedly smaller than that of *Dishonored II*, Arkane constructed something special in this standalone expansion. The sharp level design, characterisation of the world and writing – it's perhaps stronger in these areas than either of its predecessors.



10 **RESIDENT EVIL VII: BIOHAZARD**

Claustrophobic and creative in its use of first-person spaces, Capcom proved that Resident Evil was still capable of delivering thrills. The architecture of the game's location was impressive, as was its integration with PlayStation VR. A truly wondrous survival horror experience.



9 WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

In spite of its inherent bloodlust and thunderous forward momentum, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* manages to find the space to deliver a sincere and heartfelt narrative, combining best-class FPS mission design with a joyous, ridiculous sense of escalation.



8 HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE

Ninja Theory went out of its way to craft a unique and powerful experience in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. It captures the devastating effects of psychosis on the human mind within the action genre – it's a powerful and important release for the industry.



7 TACOMA

A twisting exploration of introspection and perspective, almost effortless in its ability to forge an emotional connection between us and a diverse cast of characters; as narrative and game design become truly intertwined, *Tacoma* stands as a pure experience that simply wouldn't be possible in any other entertainment medium.



6 NIGHT IN THE WOODS

A beautiful, meditative experience exploring the fragility of the human condition – of what it means to slowly become an alien in your own surroundings. *Night In The Woods* is infused with unease and discomfort, but is still relatable and observational in a way few games manage to be. The less you know of it going in, the better. Play it.



1

HARNESSING CURIOSITY IS WHAT MAKES **SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY** A DELIGHT

Released: 27 October 2017 **Developer:** Nintendo EPD **Publisher:** Nintendo **Format:** Switch

■ We often reflect back on the transition from 2D to 3D gaming and give special attention to *Super Mario 64*, since it managed that move to the additional dimension with far greater success than any of its peers of the Eighties. While mechanically and structurally Nintendo managed to create a template for the 3D platformer that would be mimicked and evolved upon for years to come, there was one element that continues to elude many game-makers, and which *Super Mario Odyssey* once again proves that Nintendo is the master of harnessing; the power of curiosity.

Perhaps the key is that the Mario series, through its long, rich and beloved history, has the power to reward curiosity with small references or treasures that others simply don't have the cache to draw from. Again and again in *Super Mario Odyssey*, you'll find little treats for long-time fans hidden at the end of corridors, behind an object or hinted at by the placement of things around it. Probably the best showcase of this is in New Donk City, the game's most referential location.

The nods to Mario's past just keep on coming in this location, but so many of them are not driven by the directed story missions of the game. Probably our favourite example is seeing a queue of the locals running down a street with an open, illuminated doorway at the front that you can walk into. Inside you'll find a classic movie theatre and on the screen… well, we'd rather not spoil the exact details, but for your observation skills and curiosity you are given a wonderfully nostalgic reward (along with a Power Moon). So, just as this level has small environmental acknowledgements of the past, those who look for the inconsistencies or little gatherings of items in the world will find something that makes their journey and drive to discover feel worthwhile.

But rewarding curiosity goes beyond fan service in this game. It extends to placing items and objects in out-of-sight and challenging locations so that we feel as if our efforts and ingenuity are being acknowledged. With the array of moves at our fingertips in *Odyssey* thanks to the addition of Cappy, it's possible to chain together acrobatics that give you access to all sorts of corners and heights that might otherwise seem insurmountable. But playing around in 3D *Mario* games has trained us to see the insurmountable as a challenge, and so we leap and slide, dive and spin our way across the chasm or up the side of a ruin, just to see if we can. And when you reach that summit or clamber onto that mysterious ledge, what you find is a huge pile of coins or another Power Moon, an acknowledgement essentially from Nintendo of your graft and perseverance. You didn't know for sure there would be anything there – in fact, you were just doing it to see if you could. The journey was its own reward, but Nintendo left something there for you anyway. In these moments it feels as if the development team is reaching out through the Switch to give you a slap on the back. It engenders a sense of camaraderie, of a shared joke between you and a team of game developers you will likely never meet. That connection that emerges between player and game is something very special indeed.








TAXI
NO LEFT TURN









THE MAKING OF KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

A STORY TOLD IN FIVE ACTS:

CARDBOARD COMPUTER TALKS ABOUT BRINGING ITS SURREAL POINT-AND-CLICK JOURNEY TO AN END

The circuitous journey that you undertake in *Kentucky Route Zero* feels in some way emblematic of the road Cardboard Computer has taken developing the game; after the team launched the Kickstarter for *KRZ* in early 2011, they found themselves taking plenty of unanticipated detours. But both player and developer are almost at journey's end. Early in 2018, *Kentucky Route Zero*'s fifth and final act will be released on PC, along with a TV edition that will bring the surreal magical realist adventure to PS4, Switch and Xbox One. For console players this has been a long time coming, for this is unquestionably one of the most important, if not understated, releases of the last decade – a shining, subversive testament to what makes the medium of videogames so damned special. Cardboard Computer's Jake Elliot, Tamas Kemenczy and Ben Babbitt join us to reflect on the journey before *KRZ* reaches its final destination.

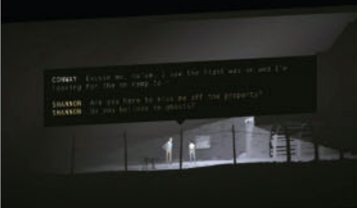
ACT I
INSPIRATION



"We all met in the art community in Chicago," Elliot tells us when we ask how the team got together. "Tamas and I have been working together on electronic art stuff, like installation art, software and performance, since 2005 or 2004 and only started making games together a year or two before *Kentucky Route Zero*."

One of those games was what Elliot describes as a "sort of experimental remix of *Colossal Cave Adventure* from the seventies, which is another adventure game set in Mammoth Cave in Kentucky." In that project Elliot and Kemenczy saw the seed of an idea for something more ambitious. As they kicked around ideas for what would become *Kentucky Route Zero* – fittingly, as Elliot was driving around Kentucky – it was that seed that took root. Elliot and Kemenczy invited Babbitt on board to put together a band to compose music for the game and, eventually, the trio ended up co-designing *KRZ* – the original idea to be fleshed out and evolved during development.

Indeed, go back to the game's original Kickstarter trailer and you can see that a lot has changed over the past six years. The team tells us that they were always open to that. "That initial trailer was sort of a pitch for the game and a way for us to establish the tone of [*KRZ*]. That was the most important thing for us at that moment," Elliot recalls. "It was a prototype of the game, but more like an atmospheric prototype or a thematic prototype, to figure out what the game was going to feel like before we got into implementing what it was going to play like mechanically."



And when it comes to the mechanics, you might be surprised to find out just how different *KRZ* could have been. "I think in the initial email that I sent to Tamas I proposed that it was going to be like *Metroid* or *Castlevania*, but a non-violent *Metroid* or *Castlevania*, like if you replaced all the combat with talking," says Elliot.

Once work on the game began in earnest, however, Cardboard Computer soon tossed the original concept for what *KRZ* would be to the wayside. It found a new form for the game, one that better matched the tone and atmosphere it had sought to establish in that early trailer… »



A petrol station with no power, manned by a lone man with financial troubles: *Kentucky Route Zero*'s first location sets a tone and establishes themes that will be followed throughout.

"I THINK IN THE INITIAL EMAIL THAT I SENT TO TAMAS I PROPOSED THAT IT WAS GOING TO BE LIKE METROID OR CASTLEVANIA, BUT A NON-VIOLENT METROID OR CASTLEVANIA"





ACT II
FINDING FORM

"It's been such a long time that it's hard for me to remember if there was a specific thing that clicked," Kemenczy says, reflecting on how *KRZ* landed on its now established style. "But I do remember there being one or two steps between what was the style you saw in the Kickstarter and what we have in the game now. It was several iterations. We started to look at the environments that we were building more as little theatre stages or set pieces. Set pieces with actors, thinking about blocking – how characters are on the stage and how the lights turn towards the camera all the time. So, a lot of character movement that automatically turns them towards the camera as if they were actors speaking to an audience," Kemenczy explains.

"There's a certain economy of reusing time and space for a bunch of different scenes or settings within a play, and that seemed interesting. It seemed boring to create a bunch of scenery just to see characters run through it like a lot of platformers do."

That framing of *Kentucky Route Zero*'s spaces as theatrical sets will resonate with anyone who has had the pleasure of playing the game and has seen the evident care Cardboard Computer has taken in crafting them. The game's locations are compositions drawn with space and time: they play brilliantly with transitions between foreground and background, employ clever visual tricks as a storytelling device, and transform in step with the game's musical set-pieces.

While it's true that you can go back to the game's first trailer and detect traces of the tone that *KRZ* has now established, there's a sense that it would never have been realised had the game not grown into this clever use of space and perspective. That it was able to do so is a result of Cardboard Computer's flexibility. The team landed on the idea of *KRZ*'s spaces as theatrical sets because they allowed *KRZ* to become what it would be, followed what was interesting and made practical concessions where necessary.

"We always had the story divided into these sections, but we thought we'd release it all in one go," Elliot tells us. "Once we started working on it, it hit us how long it takes to execute some of this stuff. We learned that on the job," he continues.

After working on the game for about a year, the trio came to realise that they either had to release *something* or face the unappealing prospect of working in isolation for what could have been many years. So, the act release and development structure emerged. A practical decision it may have been, but it also turned out to be a good creative one.

"It gave us room for the whole thing to become larger in scope," Elliot says. "Each episode, we can take a little time between them to kind of re-centre ourselves and let each episode grow into the scale that they need to be. For example, the fourth episode of the game, in the original outline, is just about crossing a river," Elliot explains. "It was super narrowly scoped, but looking at that chapter as a whole, we were able to let it grow into something more complex. We have an outline that we've been working from since the beginning, but we leave a lot of questions unanswered for ourselves about what it's going to look like materially."



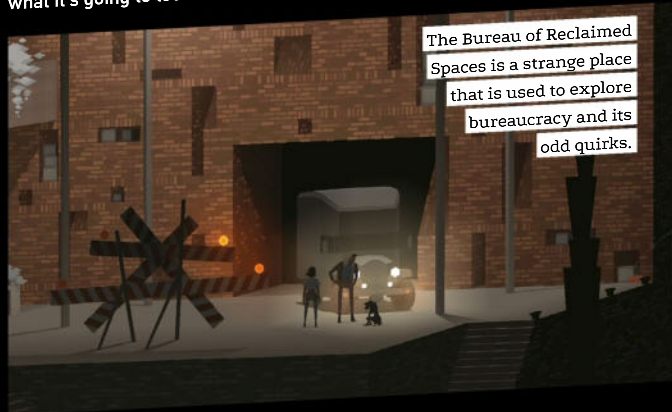
This image is just one of many examples of the way *Kentucky Route Zero* beautifully frames its scenes with an approach that feels both theatrical and filmic.





There are plenty of titbits to discover if you take the time to explore *KRZ*'s map. You'll find lots of vignettes that are clearly intended to hark back to text adventures of old.

"WE ALWAYS HAD THE STORY DIVIDED INTO THESE SECTIONS, BUT WE THOUGHT WE'D RELEASE IT ALL IN ONE GO"



The Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces is a strange place that is used to explore bureaucracy and its odd quirks.

ACT III
STRANGE SPACES

In most games, when a character points you in the direction of the next location you need to visit, you'll end up with a big flashing marker on your map. Not so in *Kentucky Route Zero*. In this game all you'll get are vague directions that are easy to forget or misinterpret. You float between places in a way that's often surreal and disorientating. That's perhaps as important to *KRZ*'s atmosphere as the locations themselves: your confusion about where you are, if you're supposed to be there, *when* you are there, even. "Are we inside or outside?", as TV repair woman Shannon ponders in Act II. If that gives you the feeling that *Kentucky Route Zero* wants you to be lost, you'd be right.

"You're supposed to be lost in this game," Elliot tells us. "The character is lost. He's looking for a place he doesn't know where it is. We tried a few different things, mechanics for navigating from space to space," he reveals. "One thing we tried was this first-person view where you're looking out the dash of the truck and you have to watch for landmarks and road signs and turn off at just the right moment. Another thing we tried is when you leave one space and go to another, there's a chance of a random encounter between the two, just to emulate the sense of being lost. Ultimately, we really wanted to do this map," Elliot says. "It was visually interesting and it was nice to let the player wonder a little bit. This is kind of what we came up with to make the player feel lost: we just ended up making them follow these directions.

"Coming to visit my wife's family in Kentucky, I had some experiences where people would give us directions that were… pretty odd. 'Take a left at this pond, there's usually some cows around there, but they might not be out there at this time of year' – these kind of impressionistic directions."

Seasoned travellers of *Kentucky Route Zero*'s strange geographic and psychic landscape might have noticed that it's filled with liminal spaces. You're always in-between. Either at literal sites of transition or visiting places transitioning from one state into another: petrol stations, boats, abandoned mines. We wanted to know what it is that seems to fascinate the team about these border spaces.

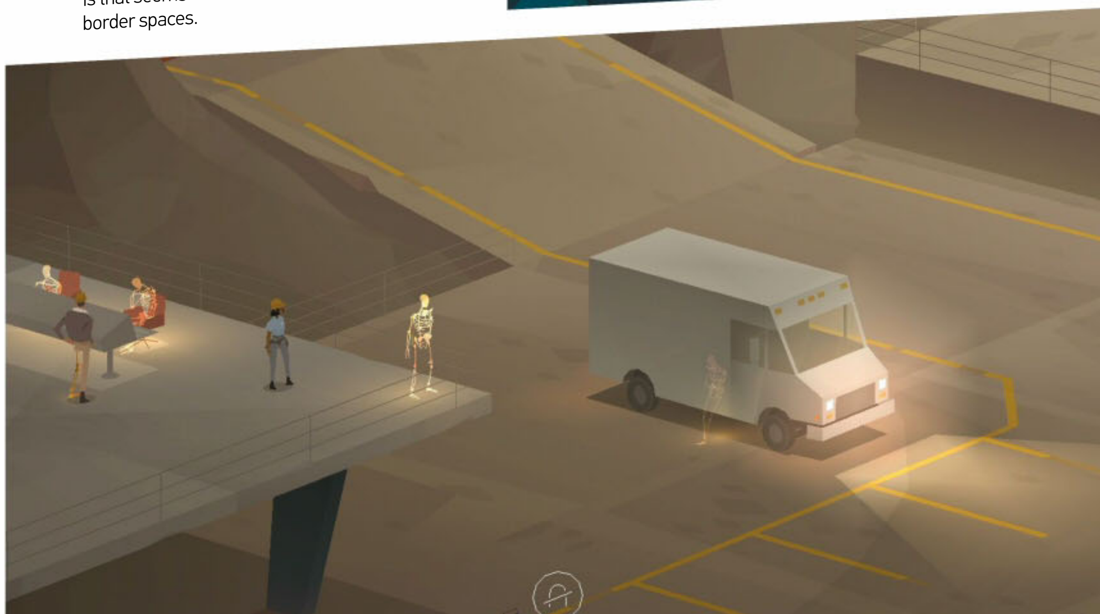
"THE CHARACTER IS LOST. HE'S LOOKING FOR A PLACE HE DOESN'T KNOW WHERE IT IS. WE TRIED A FEW DIFFERENT THINGS, MECHANICS FOR NAVIGATING FROM SPACE TO SPACE"

"There's the overall theme that you're making a delivery," Kemenczy responds. "So, a lot of these places are intersections on the most basic level, on a highway or a road; you're transitioning through spaces anyway. But there are themes, like the second act is about home and there is the museum…" considers Kemenczy. "Yeah, the people being displaced," Elliot chimes in. "And there was that old hymn we used in the original trailer and that's in the game: *This World Is Not My Home*.

"A thematic of that is 'I'm just passing through', and it's a function of that feeling of being precarious. Of your life being a precarious proposition economically; that you don't have the agency to take ownership of the world. You can't put down roots so you're being shuttled through – Kentucky itself is, I've always felt, a place full of transitions," Elliot continues. "It's a border place in a lot of ways. Geographically, we pass from the farmlands of the Midwest into the Appalachia's – that passage happens through Kentucky. During the Civil War, it was this contested border place. And then also this idea of going into caves and passing through – a cave is a threshold between the above ground and below ground. That's why caves are mystical interesting sites." »

It's typical of *Kentucky Route Zero* that it contains a game within a game, full of events and characters that are both internal and external to it.







DETOURS & EXPERIMENTS
A QUICK GUIDE TO KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO'S FREE-TO-DOWNLOAD SUPPLEMENTAL STORIES



LIMITS AND DEMONSTRATIONS: The first of *KRZ*'s free side-stories (if that's even the right phrase) sees you exploring a retrospective exhibition of the works of Lula Chamberlain, who you first encounter in the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces in the main game.



THE ENTERTAINMENT: Shifting into first-person, *The Entertainment* presents itself as a theatre production. You are sat at a table in a version of the Hard Times bar from Act III of the main game, free to observe what's going on around you.



HERE AND THERE ALONG THE ECHO: You're presented with a phone. Take it off the hook and dial the number on the *KRZ* website and you will be taken through to an automated phone service run by 'The Bureau of Secret Tourism'.



ACT IV
SEARCHING FOR MEANING





Conway and Shannon aren't about to re-enact a *Titanic* moment here. It's not really that kind of game.



You'll find no clumsy exposition in *Kentucky Route Zero*'s writing. It gives space for you to develop intuitions about its characters before it lets snippets of backstory float to the surface, dredging emotional weight with them from the murky pool of the past. Nevertheless, the writing's surreal style and frequent shifts of perspective can make it feel like it deliberately eludes meaning; Like it's being wilfully obscure. As the team have already suggested, however, there are themes to be picked up on.

The theme of economic uncertainty is perhaps the most obvious. *KRZ* is full of people exploited and broken by an inhumane and faceless economic system: dead miners who were paid in tokens that they had to slot into fans to keep air circulating in the mine, families whose homes have been repossessed, a doctor whose genuine desire to help people has been twisted by debt to make him into a tool to push yet more debt onto his patients. We wanted to know if those strong economic themes represent an attempt to draw a connection between the post-financial crash world of today and the depression era that *Kentucky Route Zero* heavily evokes.

"It was definitely happening right after the financial crash in 08/09, so that was something specific we were responding to in that moment," Elliot replies. "But also, looking at the game, it's set in America and a lot of it is about American history in regards to wealth inequality and precarity and the exploitation of labour. So, yeah, the depression era and the 40 years or so leading up to the depression where wealth inequality was accelerating," he continues. "In Kentucky, we had the Coal Wars in that period, where mining companies were exploiting their workers and using violence to suppress unions. Another period that we look at a bit is the Seventies during the oil crisis. There are those specific moments that we try to connect, and we're also careful to try and set the game in a non-time, to kind of conflate all these times, because it's important to us to communicate that this moment right now, or that moment seven years ago, they're not unique. They are part of a pattern."

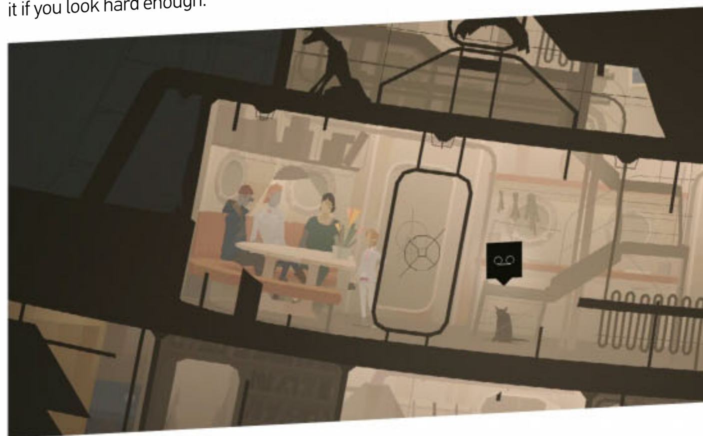
Kentucky Route Zero also gives you plenty of space to find meaning yourself and to shape it through the dialogue choices that you make. It often feels like choices are framed to put you in the position of a storyteller, rather than as a character making a decision: the game will offer you the option "Conway stays put", rather than "Stay put", for example, expressly situating you outside of the character.

"We play with the grammar in a few spots like that," Elliot explains. "The main constraint that's at work there is that the script is meant to, in most cases, read like a stage play. So those things are meant to read like stage directions. That's another bit of a call-back to American tragic theatre – a lot of the famous works of American tragic theatre deal with these same issues of economic precarity. *Death Of A Salesman* and *The Iceman Cometh* are two of them that we call back to a lot. Sometimes there are these italicised passages that are mixed in there that are a little bit more of a stream of consciousness to kind of disrupt that a little bit. Those are styled after some of Tennessee Williams' play scripts."

Thick with references, history and styles drawn from Cardboard Computer's extensive research, it can be hard to draw meaning from *KRZ*. As opaque as it may be though, you can find it if you look hard enough.

"LOOKING AT THE GAME, IT'S SET IN AMERICA AND A LOT OF IT IS ABOUT AMERICAN HISTORY IN REGARDS TO WEALTH INEQUALITY AND PRECARITY AND THE EXPLOITATION OF LABOUR"





DRUNKS, DEBTORS & DRIFTERS

INTRODUCING THE RAGTAG GROUP OF TRAVELLERS THAT FALL INTO EACH OTHER'S COMPANY IN KRZ.

CONWAY: A delivery driver for Lysette's Antiques trying to make his last delivery to 5 Dogwood Drive. He has struggled with alcoholism throughout his life.

SHANNON: The TV repair woman joins Conway early on, prompted by a mysterious message left for her by her cousin Weaver, a semi-mystical presence who may well have a part to play in Act V.

THE DOG: Conway's tired old hound accompanies him from the beginning. It can be called Homer, Blue or remain nameless, depending on your choice in the game's first scene.

JOHNNY: Junebug's collaborator and companion Johnny often seems distant from the events unfolding around him. He has a passion for sound and an evident affinity for animals.

JUNEBUG: Junebug is a robot who abandoned the purpose for which she was created to become a musician along with her companion Johnny. She has a wicked sense of humour.

EZRA: It's no surprise that Ezra seems to be searching for belonging. His family were made homeless and after going off to explore one day, he came back to the bus shelter where they had been sleeping to find them gone.

ACT V
THE FINALE

Laced as *Kentucky Route Zero* is with tragedy, we wonder if the team intends for us to find any little rays of hope by the time we finish the soon-to-be-released final episode.

"It's a tragedy for sure," Elliot replies. "There are some hopeful moments in there and a lot of it's about human relationships, so there's some hope in that project, but yeah, it's definitely a tragedy."

"I agree," echoes Kemenczy, "but in terms of story, I think we try and add a hopeful layer to it. In Act IV we talked about trying to make it clear that there are communities and people making a home in these liminal spaces along the river, so even though that act had probably one of the most tragic scenes, hopefully that's offset by having a look into the communities that exist there."

"And tragedy is about human nobility too," Elliot remarks. "It's not all miserable and pessimistic."

And just how close is this tragedy, coming to an end all these years after its beginning, to matching the original vision? "I personally don't really care about what we originally envisioned," Kemenczy replies. "We like to keep the outline that we have pretty open ended."

"Yeah, it's mostly for utility," says Elliot. "If we have some things planned in advance, that's almost a concession we have to make so we can do things like foreshadowing and set some arcs going. But if we didn't have to do that, then maybe we wouldn't even have planned them!"

Kemenczy does tell us, however, that "the outline, from the beginning, had a specific end". So as circuitous as the journey to get here might well have been, the destination was always in sight, having been envisaged from the start. We'll be there with them soon enough.

This is a game heavy with symbolism and references to other work. Don't feel bad if some of them fly over your head. We had that feeling plenty of times, too.

"WE STARTED TO LOOK AT THE ENVIRONMENTS THAT WE WERE BUILDING MORE AS LITTLE THEATRE STAGES OR SET PIECES"



WORLD DOMINATION

HOW PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS PLANS TO CONQUER CONSOLE NOW THAT IT HAS PREVAILED ON PC

PlayerUnknown's *Battlegrounds* is 2017's biggest success story. Even now, several months after launching in Early Access, it regularly has hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of consecutive players at any given time. Its popularity is immense, a true giant in the multiplayer arena, going toe to toe with the biggest titles offered by Triple-A publishers, despite not being content complete. For multiplayer games, *Battlegrounds*' success might truly be a game changer. And, on 12 December, the ultimate battle royal experience is coming to Xbox One.

If you haven't heard of it, or you're not sure what it is, then *Battlegrounds* has a refreshingly simple premise. 100 players drop onto an island with nothing but the clothes on their backs, and the goal is to be the last one standing. That's it. You choose when you exit that starting plane and where you land out across a sprawling map, guiding yourself to valuable loot or simply trying to evade other players. There are various weapons and attachments to find, vehicles to use and an ever shrinking deadly circle that pushes players together over the course of the game. You can play solo, in a duo or as part of a four-player team. Yet how you survive, how you win, is entirely in your hands; *Battlegrounds* is simple to understand and yet difficult to master, and therein lies its allure.

Battlegrounds has been dominating Steam's charts and streams on Twitch all year. At the time of writing, the game has sold an outstanding 20 million copies, and that is only expected to increase by the time this issue is in your hands. Similar success is sure to follow when the game hits Xbox One's Game Preview service on 12 December, a move that has proved very exciting for developer Bluehole. "Xbox is synonymous with gaming, you know what I mean? And there's a huge player base out there that prefer to play on console, so bringing it to the Xbox One systems is just great," says Brendan Greene, creative director at Bluehole and mastermind behind the battle royal game experience in its current iteration. "It's like I can finally say yup, I have a game on Xbox."

Despite *Battlegrounds*' success, Greene insists that his primary motivation isn't on the numbers, but on ensuring that the core gameplay cycle is as fun on console as it is on its native PC platform. "So I think we could see incredible numbers on console, but again, I don't want to jinx it. We're more focused on getting a good game out. Like, as much as

Finding a good vantage point is key.

Never be ashamed to hide in the corner of a shed.

it sounds a bit shitty, we're not focused on players numbers. Sure, from a server point of view we have to be, but that's what our goal here is. It's not to have millions of players, our goal is to put a good game onto both platforms."

But what does a good game mean for Xbox players? For Greene, the promise of *PUBG* is its unpredictability. "Look at Halo and Call of Duty, Gears Of War, these are very popular on console. So we're giving [players] another shooter, one that's unique every time." That really is what makes *PUBG* such a thrilling game to play. Despite only one, admittedly huge map, no two games play out alike. With 100 players in an open sandbox, anything can happen, and the joy of *PUBG* is deciding how you want to play for yourself. "I think that's what makes it appealing," considers Greene. "There is no hand holding, this is a hard game, let's see how you do."

Below: Greene started playing around with *Arma 2*, modding it into a *Battle Royale*-inspired survival game.



Hiding in a bathroom till the final circle? Going after the first person you find with nothing but a frying pan? Every approach is valid, and the game permits all play styles. Complete freedom to succeed, alone or as a team. This is why it's captivated so many, letting even the most unskilled player stand a chance by allowing them to carve out their own playstyle, no matter how cowardly (or indeed reckless) it may seem at the time. Coming out on top as the last one standing, through nothing but your own ingenuity, and earning that infamous 'chicken dinner' achievement is a thrill like nothing else in gaming right now. Xbox owners won't be waiting long to see what all the fuss is about.

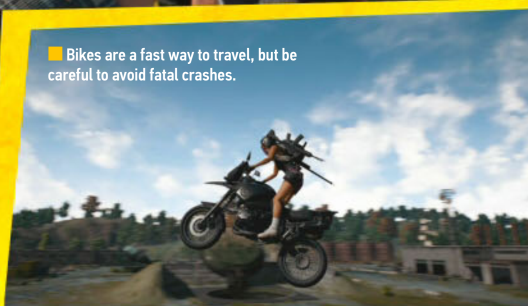
While the core of the experience remains the same, Xbox One players won't be left dealing with the version of the game that launched in back in March in Early Access. Every update that has already arrived, and »





> The Coalition is helping us with controller feedback and giving us their input into how it feels





Bikes are a fast way to travel, but be careful to avoid fatal crashes.



A BATTLE ROYALE HISTORY

THE ROAD THAT LEAD TO PUBG'S CREATION

If *Battlegrounds* seems to have come from nowhere, know that it truly hasn't. For creator Brendan Greene, Mister PlayerUnknown himself, this has been a journey that started many years ago. Greene made a name for himself under the online handle PlayerUnknown when he made the mod *DayZ: Battle Royale* in 2013, an offshoot of the already popular *Arma 2* mod. Taking inspiration from the 2000 Japanese film, it laid out the simple template that would eventually become *PUBG*. This mod became very popular unto itself, and was eventually followed by a similar mod for *Arma 3*. He was also hired as a consultant for Sony's *H1Z1*, which lead to the game eventually being split into two separate titles, *H1Z1: Just Survive* and *H1Z1: King Of The Kill*.

It was following all the attention he'd received for these games that the groundwork for *PUBG* itself was laid. South Korean company Bluehole, keen to have its own battle-royale title, reached out to Greene, and soon after made him creative director of the company. Development started in early 2016 and the game was released into Early Access on 23 March, 2017.

everything that is coming to the PC version in the future, will come to Xbox as well. "When we launch on Game Preview on 12 December… it'll be pretty much the same build as you're playing on PC [right now]," Greene assures us, noting that while the much anticipated arrival of vaulting will be in the Xbox launch build, the magnificent new desert map will *not*. "The desert map isn't coming yet because we still need to fix it a lot. We need to run it through testing and we'll do that on the PC version first."

While the Xbox version will be identical in almost every way, Greene did confirm that first-person modes will not be supported at launch, with the game restricted to third-person for the time being – the mode that Greene considers to be the standard for *PUBG*. As for visual fidelity, Greene is confident that the Xbox One version will have parity with the PC version, although Xbox One X owners and high-end PC owners shouldn't expect to see 4K assets any time soon. "We do have HDR [support], I have seen it on Xbox One and it does look very pretty. Like it really, really does. We want to get those 4K textures in there, but we still have to make them. They don't exist yet, you know our terrain artist he's like '4K textures? Fuck' cause it's a lot of work," laughs Greene. "The amount of detail that has to go into the 4K textures is immense, and it's going to take us some time to get them, but we do have a plan."

When it comes to frame rate, things are a little more complicated. While Greene and the team at Bluehole are pushing for a stable 60 frames per second on the console release, various obstacles (including that of the underpowered Xbox One) mean that it may indeed be locked down to 30fps for the time being. Will this matter for *Battlegrounds*? Greene thinks not. "The great thing about *Battlegrounds* is that it's not… unlike [Call Of Duty] or the more high-paced shooters, frame rate isn't that important. Yes, *it's important*," he clarifies quickly with a smile, "but it's not as important for us as it is in a twitch shooter. So we're aiming for 60; not sure if we'll get there, but that is our aim."

When pushed for clarification on whether the Xbox One X version is capable of eventually delivering 60fps gameplay, Greene seems confident, although the launch Xbox One hardware may be something of a roadblock here. "Definitely on Xbox One X, 60fps. On Xbox One, we're not sure. We may have to limit it at 30fps, maybe, but the last time I saw it, it was running at about 30 to 40. We're still constantly improving it so, you know, the aim is to get 60. That's why we're doing Game Preview, because I think the great thing about console is it's a locked hardware system, so we can do really specific tweaks that tune it for those systems. I have great faith that we'll get there.

Moving to Xbox One has meant more than just bringing the exact same game to console. Partnering with Microsoft has brought features and quality of life to the game. Nowhere will this be felt more than the improvements to the game's controls on gamepad. "Publishing with [Microsoft] means we have the builds being sent off nightly to Redmond and they pass it around internally, to all their various teams – even to the guys at The Coalition, the Gears of War guys. They're helping us with controller feedback and kind of, like, giving us their input into how it feels. You know, this is something we wouldn't have gotten if we were just publishing ourselves. It's a real good place to be in."

Battlegrounds running on Xbox One has yet to be demonstrated to the press or public, with the build appearing at conventions and behind closed doors simply the PC offering with an Xbox UI overlaid on it. That said, Greene is excited by internal reaction. "Everyone that's played it says it feels bloody natural, it feels good. [The team] has done a really good job of getting the feeling onto the controller. So I'm really happy, you know, I'm just happy that now people can choose to play wherever they want. On PC or in their living room."

PC players shouldn't feel left out, however, as all the work gone into this new version will be a benefit to them as well. "Working with Microsoft has been so good. They know


Two- and four-player modes mean you can drive with someone riding shotgun – or crossbow if that's more your style


Rooftops can make it easier to spot targets, or simply turn you into one.




Being a successful team means watching each other's backs.







their systems backwards. Even the optimisations we make for the console version will reflect well into the PC version as well, and vice versa."

With both versions of similar parity there has been hope from fans that there may be crossplay at some point in the future, something Greene hopes for too, but is uncertain about. "Since it's the same experience we'd love to see these communities play against each other. It's going to require some work, we're not sure technically yet if it's even possible. But we are researching it."

Beyond the game's release on Xbox One there are many more features to come. Bluehole has promised far more cosmetic customisation options for characters down the road, including more clothing and the introduction of tattoos. The much-teased desert map will finally make its way into players hands early in 2018 and offer a huge variation to the game's sandbox and core-gameplay loop. Vaulting will be coming even sooner to PC players and could change the game more drastically than anything else, making manoeuvring the dense environments of the game so much easier, creating opportunities for swift flanks and daring escapes. Then there is the 3D replay feature, which promises to give players a supremely detailed way to analyse every tense moment and near miss. Even further ahead, Greene has more ideas for expansion. "I want to have a levelling system, a ranking system. I want to have some kind of system that gives your character age almost, that you know he's been playing *Battlegrounds* a long time."

Yet for all the promise of these radical changes, the focus is firmly on optimisation. Xbox One owners have been slow to adopt Game Preview, and that means optimisation will be key as Bluehole looks to stabilise its release and get it in fighting-ready shape to confront surmounting competition appearing on console. "Our focus is optimisation. Optimising characters, vehicles, to make it less frame sucky when lots of them are around. We're working on terrain optimisations… really optimising what we have."

Of course no game can be as large as *PUBG* without its sceptics, and it has drawn plenty of critics, with a negative view on Early Access and the team's efforts. Greene remains adamant that those concerns are not at all valid. "There are a lot of misconceptions about development or what we're doing, like even some commentators saying we're a pump and dump and it's like, how could you think that? Really? We've shown off for the last six months that we want to finish this, you know, and just because we had to pull back an update, so then people are thinking 'take the money and run' but it's like, no! Making games is hard."

Greene even hopes that their hard work will prove the value of Steam's Early Access program, and help remove the stigma that's been attached to the service. "You know, making games is hard and the consumer doesn't realise that. A small team [might] run into a problem they cannot solve and then they run out of money, and then like, what do you do then? So many people have such optimism when starting to make a game, but then making games is hard, so you run into an issue and you're like *fuck*. You know? And it's something you may never have thought about. So I want to show that Early Access is a great way to make games with a community. It really is. It's a great platform. It's the same with Game Preview. Allowing the players to give you feedback, especially for a multiplayer game. It's just essential to making a great game."

Still, for all the promise of the future and what *PUBG* could yet become, for Brendan Greene, seeing it to the finishing line is the most important thing of all. "Like really, that's all I want to do, get this to a complete state, get all the systems I wanted and really ramp it up for a platform for eSports. Like I want to see the community grow and create these community events that rise up to our first major, and that's kind of where I go okay, now we have a considered eSport. And that's where I think okay, now *Battlegrounds* is good. But until then my head is down."




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180
ITS OPEN WORLD SHOOTER
THE DIVISION
REVIEWED
HALO 3
REVIEWED
PROJECT GOTHAM RAC
REVIEWED
METROID PRIME CORRUPTION
GOD OF WAR III
SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV
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SPECIAL 50th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

15 YEARS OF gamesTM

WE MARK THIS MASSIVE MAGAZINE MILESTONE BY REFLECTING ON THE WAY THE INDUSTRY HAS CHANGED AND THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE HELPED TO DRIVE INNOVATION IN THAT TIME



THE **LEGENDS** OF OUR

THE INFLUENTIAL FIGURES OF GAMING WHO HAVE SHAPED THE INDUSTRY IN THE LAST 15 YEARS

CLIFF BLESZINSKI

Gears Of War (2006), LawBreakers (2017)

Watching the rise of Bleszinki at Epic and the influence his bombastic and entertaining brand of videogame design had on the rest of the industry was something to behold. Unreal Tournament was at its peak as games™ launched and *Gears Of War* ushered in the next decade or more of third-person action game design. Bleszinski's series was a powerful showcase for the Unreal Engine too, helping to make it the most powerful such tool in the industry in that time.





Ken Levine

BioShock (2007), BioShock Infinite (2013)

Having enjoyed *Tribes: Vengeance* (on which Levine wrote) and *SWAT 4* (for which he was executive producer), we're not sure we could have foreseen the seismic influence Ken Levine would have on the industry and our appreciation of what a videogame could achieve in terms of storytelling and thematic impact. Levine's BioShock titles, spinning out from his *System Shock 2* days, are true gems of our lifetime.

Jade Raymond

Assassin's Creed (2007), Star Wars Battlefront II (2017)

As one of the creative visionaries behind the Assassin's Creed franchise, Jade Raymond deserves a massive amount of credit for helping to establish one of the biggest franchises in modern gaming. That she has gone on to found more than one new studio since then, formed around finding creative teams and driving new ideas, only makes us admire her work more. Now, having founded Motive with EA, she has a hand in the future of Star Wars games from the publisher.



AMY HENNIG

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune (2007), Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009)

While her Star Wars project with Visceral appears to have collapsed, we will still be among the first in line for whatever title Hennig next attaches her creative talents to. Her part as director in the *Legacy Of Kain* series gave her a pretty good reputation in our early years, but the release of *Uncharted 2* sent her soaring. To this day it is one of the best structured, paced and designed action games we've ever had the pleasure of playing.





Todd Howard

Fallout 3 (2008), The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011)

Since 2002, as consoles have become more powerful and versatile, we've seen some PC staples transition to the living room, and Bethesda has been one of the great beneficaries of that migration. Todd Howard, as a project leader, producer and game director, takes a lot of credit from us for helping to bring Fallout back in such a bold and engrossing way, as well as evolving on the success of *Oblivion* to deliver the incredible *Skyrim*.

Hidetaka Miyazaki

Demon's Souls (2009), Bloodborne (2015)

At a time when the game industry had become intoxicated by the promise of new riches in the casual gaming scene, one game came crashing through the masses to deliver the kind of challenging experience that we true believers in the medium had been crying out for. No more hand holding and no more easy rides; *Demon's Souls* brought death back into fashion, and Miyazaki's vision has seen him rise quickly up the ranks of From Software as a result.



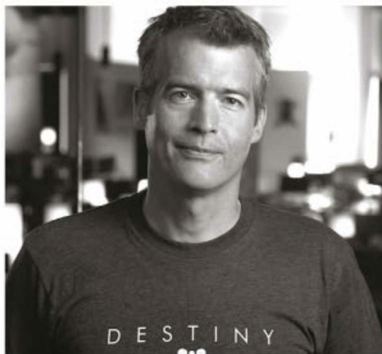
LIFETIME



Mark Cerny

PlayStation 4 (2013), Knack (2013)

The full weight of Mark Cerny's influence on the games industry can't really be explained simply by a list of games he had a direct hand in designing. Frankly speaking, there has hardly been a first-party release through Sony for the last 15 years that he hasn't worked as a consultant on, and given his design background, you can bet he's someone who likes to get his hands dirty. As the lead architect of the PS4, he also gets credit for this generation's biggest console.



Jason Jones

Halo 2 (2004), Destiny (2014)

Largely steering clear of the limelight, Bungie co-founder Jason Jones still gets talked about a large amount with regards to Halo and Destiny, not least because everyone involved in those titles knows how integral he has been to their development. As project lead on *Halo 2* and design lead on *Destiny*, he has been at the heart of two gigantic franchises, and helped to drive both of them towards design innovations along the way.

Siobhan Reddy

LittleBigPlanet (2008), Tearaway (2013)

We would happily include the entirety of the Media Molecule founding team among our legends, their creativity and passion being so powerful and influential in the last few years, but much credit should be given to Siobhan Reddy as studio director, making Media Molecule one of the most respected game makers in the country, while also supporting production of some insanely ambitious games like *LittleBigPlanet*.



Goichi Suda

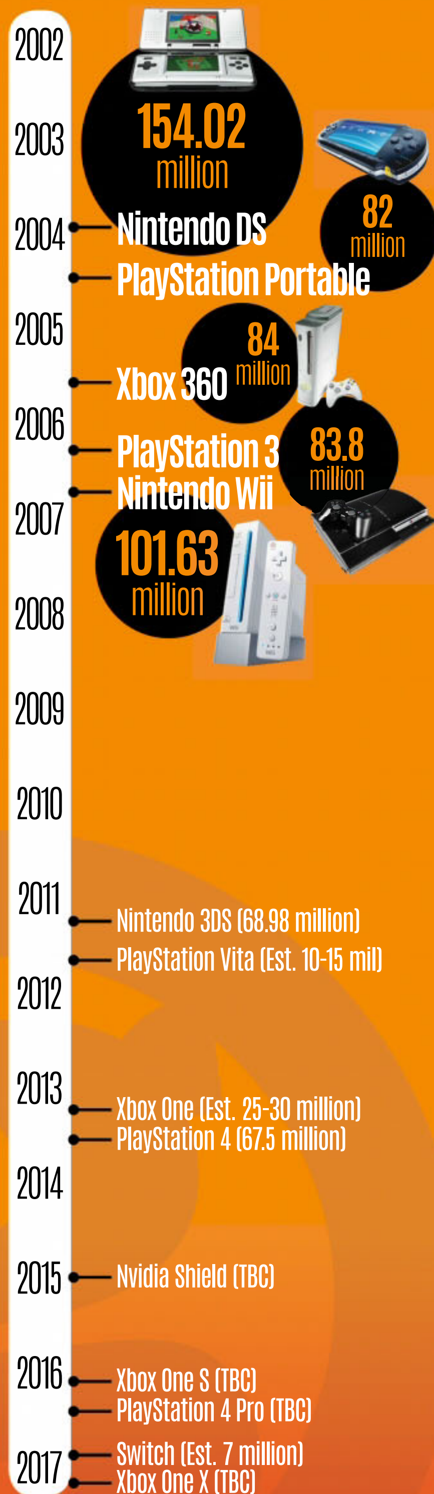
No More Heroes (2007), Lollipop Chainsaw (2012)

There are few developers we've looked forward to catching up with over the years more than Goichi Suda, aka Suda51. His wonderfully idiosyncratic creative style, sense of humour and desire to play with conventions has given us some of the most bizarre and delightful games of the last 15 years. From *Killer7* to *Killer Is Dead*, he's been defying trends, and sometimes even common sense, for a long time. And now he's bringing back No More Heroes, we couldn't be happier.



THE BEST SELLING CONSOLES

WHICH FORMATS HAVE DOMINATED THE LAST 15 YEARS?



IN HONOUR OF SATORU IWATA



KEZA MACDONALD,
Editor of Kotaku UK and **games™** alum, reflects on the presidency and influence of the man who helped shape the last 15 years of Nintendo

I only met Satoru Iwata once, at E3 in 2012, the year that Nintendo released the Wii U. I was there to interview Shigeru Miyamoto, but Iwata was present too, explaining the new console to newspaper and financial journalists. It is difficult to believe that it was only three years before he died. I always hoped I would have the chance to talk to Iwata at length; his Iwata Asks interviews, in which he genially but insightfully quizzed Nintendo's developers, and the gently bizarre Nintendo Directs, in which he always personally appeared, suggested a playful, thoughtful personality that seemed reflected in the direction Nintendo itself took under his stewardship.

Company CEOs, in the videogame business as in any other, are often detached figures: they change frequently, they think and talk in numbers, and only rarely do they take much of an interest in the actual thing that their company does to make money. But Iwata had, as he said in his much-quoted GDC keynote speech in 2005, the heart of a gamer. He had made games for 22 years at HAL Laboratory before taking charge of Nintendo in 2002, and he never lost sight of the joy that they brought to people. Over the 2000s, Nintendo brought the joy of games to millions of people who had never experienced it before with the Nintendo DS and the Wii (the second and fifth best-selling consoles of all-time, respectively). Iwata was such a huge part of that, steering the company to focus on novel, fun experiences rather than joining the technological arms race.

Iwata was only the second president of Nintendo in my lifetime; his predecessor, Hiroshi Yamauchi, was head of the company for 53 years. He was the first person ever to lead the company who wasn't related to Yamauchi. Imagine that. I dearly wish that Iwata had a whole half-century to exert his influence on Nintendo and the gaming world. The 13 years that he was president of Nintendo were transformative. I was working at this very magazine when the Wii was first announced at the Tokyo Game Show in 2005 – I remember people scoffing at the ludicrous concept, groaning at how ugly that original phat DS was. But these two weird machines totally changed the gaming world, giving developers the chance to think differently about making games – something that Iwata was passionate about, as a former developer himself.

Despite Iwata's achievements, he was always charmingly understated: a quietly confident man who always spoke thoughtfully and honestly, and whose presence in the videogame industry has been greatly missed over the past two years. I miss his spirited presence in Nintendo Directs – whether in a Luigi hat, solemnly presenting a bunch of bananas, or as a muppet. But more than that, I miss the qualities that his version of Nintendo embodied: creativity, earnestness and an unwavering belief that videogames should be for everyone.

> "I DEARLY WISH THAT IWATA HAD HAD A WHOLE HALF-CENTURY TO EXERT HIS INFLUENCE ON NINTENDO AND THE GAMING WORLD"

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THE TEN CLUB

ONLY 16 GAMES HAVE RECEIVED FULL MARKS FROM **GAMES™** SINCE ISSUE ONE. HERE'S A QUICK REMINDER OF WHAT THEY ARE



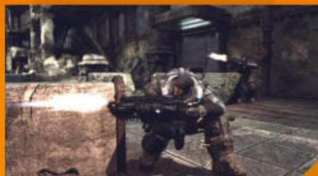
Metroid Prime • NOV 2002

This first-person shooter was an amazingly well-handled transition for the Metroid series, placing Samus Aran in a new context, challenging the likes of *Halo: Combat Evolved* and still managing to innovate with new gameplay concepts. A stunning piece of work.



Burnout 3: Takedown • SEPT 2004

A game that continues to be debated on **games™** to this day, it's also a powerful touchstone for us when deciding what games 'deserve' a ten score. What made Criterion's racer worthy? For us it was about the pure fun and joy of playing.



Gears Of War • NOV 2006

The game that kickstarted a generation, *Gears Of War* was the champion of the HD era, offering the benchmark for visuals, the handling of gunplay, popularising cover systems and providing a streamlined, intense narrative. The seismic shifts we've seen since are proof of its importance.



God Of War II • MAR 2007

Just as one era of gaming was beginning, another was coming to a close, and as far as PS2 titles go, representing the anarchic, arcade influences of that system and the more mature, but not necessarily grown-up content it helped to popularise, *GOW II* is the epitome.



BioShock • AUG 2007

Ken Levine's stunning underwater world was one of the best realised and expertly revealed we had experienced to that date. The shooter combat was meaty, the progression enticing, and the narrative twists and turns engrossing. A perfect mix of entertainment and art.



Grand Theft Auto IV • APR 2008

Rockstar went darker than ever with its first GTA outing of the generation, turning its typical rags-to-riches story on its head with a rags-to-moderately-less-rag-like lifestyle story, plenty of tragic deaths and some of the best GTA missions ever designed.



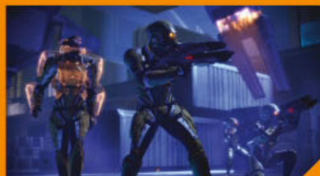
Fallout 3 • OCT 2008

It's funny to think back to when Bethesda first secured the Fallout IP, and those among the hardcore support who bemoaned it becoming a post-apocalyptic Elder Scrolls. Their minds probably weren't changed in the end, but the final release blew us away.



Demon's Souls • FEB 2009

We jumped on the Miayazaki bandwagon early with an import review of *Demon's Souls* before it got its UK release. Its relentless, bare-bones approach to RPG combat and progression was absolutely stunning, and a completely fresh take on the format for the time.



Mass Effect 2 • JAN 2010

Bioware had been gradually perfecting its RPG model for many years by the time the Mass Effect story began, but it still carried with it much of the baggage of the past. *Mass Effect 2* stripped much of that away, revealing a high-action, narratively gripping adventure with a wonderful supporting cast.



Super Mario Galaxy 2 • MAY 2010

It's easy to forget, deluged as we were by motion-control experiences on the Wii, that Nintendo's most successful home console gave us some really innovative versions of classic titles. *Super Mario Galaxy 2* took the success of the first outing and delivered an even more polished, expanded vision.



LittleBigPlanet 2 • JAN 2011

The Play, Create, Share philosophy of *LittleBigPlanet* was a revelation, but we could never have imagined the freedom to create that this sequel would offer. Opening up its fields of view to new game types, Media Molecule handed the tools to a hungry community of game makers and tinkerers.



Dead Space 2 • JAN 2011

Survival horror took a big dip after the release of Visceral's stunning sequel, and perhaps that shouldn't be a surprise, because this was about as perfect as you could wish for. The *Resi 4*-inspired shooter took body-horror nastiness to new heights by doubling down on its sci-fi setting.



BioShock Infinite • MAR 2013

Ken Levine returned with his vision for a *BioShock* sequel, and it felt the same, except different. There's always a lighthouse. Always a city. And just as the first game explored player agency, this did fate and guilt. This kinetically charged, thought-provoking entry still gets us pondering.



Grand Theft Auto V • SEP 2013

Showing that it can still innovate and adapt, *GTAV* didn't just give us a simple crime drama, but a triple-headed narrative, leaping across San Andreas to reveal the interwoven fates of three men. It's Rockstar's most incredible open world, and *GTA Online* continues to be a revelation.



MGSV: The Phantom Pain • SEP 2015

It felt as if everything Hideo Kojima had been working on with Konami was leading up to this, an observation given so much more potency as it would prove to be his final game with the publisher and series. *MGSV* is an incredible open world full of possibilities and room for player experimentation.



Super Mario Odyssey • OCT 2017

Our most recent 10/10, and one of the easier we've given, Mario's Switch outing is a perfect marriage of innovation and nostalgia, rewarding fans with nods and references while also delivering challenges and worlds that astonish. Its pacing, design and ingenuity are incredible.

15 YEARS OF TRENDS

THE GAMING INNOVATIONS THAT HAVE COME AND SOMETIMES GONE FROM THE LAST 15 YEARS



Stereoscopic 3D

As *Avatar* hit the big screen in 2009, there was already a push to see if games could take advantage of the technology in our living rooms. PlayStation 3 was at the forefront of this, in part because Sony was also committing its TV division to the tech. Suffice to say that it didn't take off. Why? As far as we were concerned, it was taking away from the HD visuals without adding back enough by way of immersion.



Virtual Reality

Simply being able to see in three dimensions wasn't enough to wow us, but being fully surrounded by VR was something else entirely. In this format, immersion is unavoidable as game worlds envelope you and heighten the experience like never before. Price points are still a massive barrier to entry, and we've yet to see a killer app emerge on any of the major platforms, but it feels like something is growing.



Motion Control

The launch of the Nintendo Wii in 2006 took the curious amusement of motion control gaming, as experienced with devices like the EyeToy on PS3, into the mainstream. PlayStation followed with the Move, Xbox 360 took things up another level with Kinect. The boom has well and truly died at this point, but motion gaming does still have a place thanks to VR support and with its mild implementation in Switch.



Rhythm Action

Of all the big hits of the last 15 years, we would have struggled to predict that music peripheral experiences would explode in the way that they did. With *Singstar* and *Guitar Hero* breathing one last breath into the PS2, the next generation saw expansions into *Rock Band* and *DJ Hero* before finally sputtering out. They still tick along in the background now, but have lost some of their lustre.



Smartphones

The launch of the App Store for iPhone in 2008 brought with it a whole new range of mobile game experiences, inspired by touch and swipe controls. Phenomena like *Angry Birds* and *Words With Friends* began to sweep the world, making a serious dent in the handheld console market. More recently we've seen *Pokémon Go* become a massive success, Mario has made his mobile debut, and *Fire Emblem* is reaching a new audience.



Achievements

Chasing after accolades in gaming, typically your position on a leaderboard, has been at the heart of the experience since the medium's earliest arcade origins, but such measures of skill had fallen a little out of favour. The Xbox 360's introduction of Achievement points in 2005 was a relatively low-key addition to the HD console, but its impact was gigantic, enhancing the gaming experience with new incentives to play.



Digital Downloads

The advent of faster internet speeds meant that the last 15 years has seen a massive expansion and popularisation of digital downloads. Started on PC and gradually embraced by consoles, first for smaller or indie releases and now triple-A games, digital distribution has changed the way we purchase titles, and had a massive impact on retail (and second-hand game trading). You can expect plenty more changes in this field.



Crowdfunding

Getting funding for a game has always been a major source of concern for game developers, often having to find major publisher backing for their ideas. But the advent of crowdfunding, whether through Kickstarter, Indiegogo or some other scheme has been revolutionary. It's given new life to niche concepts, helping developers find their audience while also bringing more transparency to the development process.



DLC

The Dreamcast brought consoles online, and PC was connected for years, but it really took the Xbox 360 to popularise the concept of online gaming and by extension make expansions to releases a common occurrence. Whether it's new story missions, new maps for multiplayer titles or cosmetic items to make your game experience more individual to you, DLC has had a massive role to play in gaming of late.

2002–2017

THE ERA OF **HD** AND **ONLINE**


The combination of high-resolution graphics and online connectivity have seen the biggest leaps forward for graphics and social gaming we can remember in a single generation of hardware.

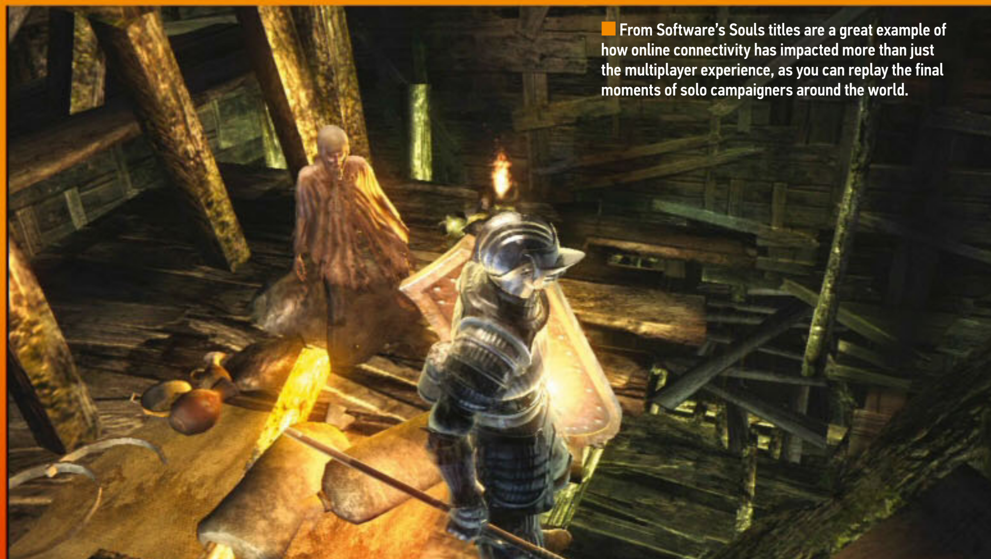
Reflecting on the last 15 years, there are two innovations that we find hard to separate as major interests and concerns for **games™** in that time, and that's high-definition resolutions and online play.

HD gaming started for consoles in 2005 with the Xbox 360, but the fidelity of games had been creeping up on PC for some time. The way this supported more realistic environments and character models helped push the industry forward into more mature themes and narratives. Gaming was able to grow up because it was getting closer to replicating the real world visually.

And so it was that we began to become obsessed with interlaced and progressive scanning on our games. We scoured for HDMI cables and checked the contrast ratios on our new TVs. The tech for displaying our favourite games has become as important as what's powering them, something that we're reminded of as 4K begins to become the new standard.

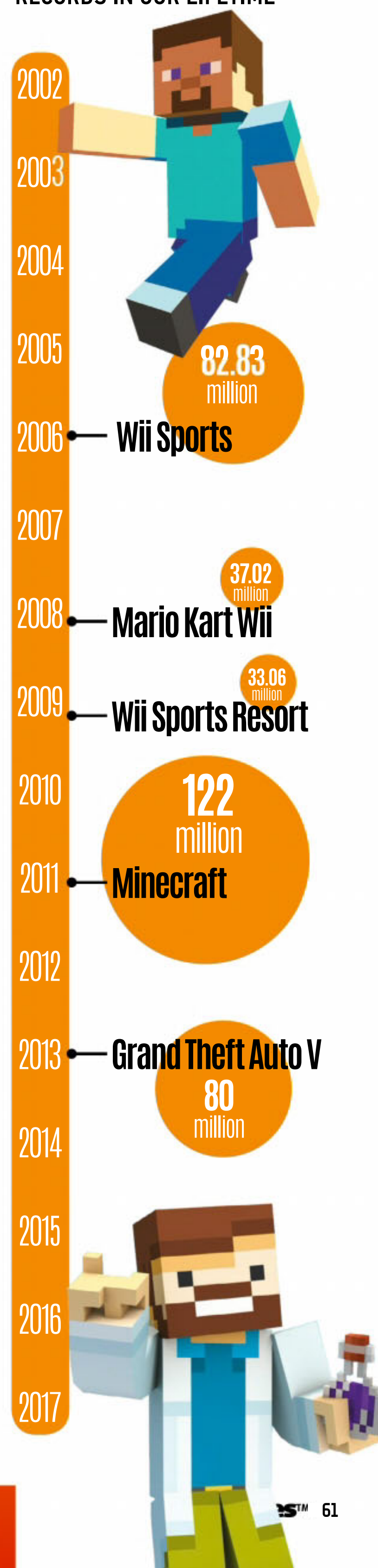
Simultaneous with this has been the establishment of online gaming as the norm. And by that we don't just mean playing multiplayer games, but having your game connected online in other ways too. Things like expansions and DLC are some of the more obvious examples of how this has enhanced and built upon our experiences, but it even goes down to small things like party chat functionality. And then you have community features, such as the sharing of gameplay moments in something like *Demon's Souls*, which creates a social aspect to an otherwise solo experience. We've seen so many interesting and innovative applications of online connectivity over the years, and now it's really at the heart of all of our favourite games.

When we reflect back to gaming in 2002, these two things combined are really the standout enhancements to the way we experience games in 2017.


From Software's Souls titles are a great example of how online connectivity has impacted more than just the multiplayer experience, as you can replay the final moments of solo campaigners around the world.

THE **BEST SELLING** GAMES

THE TITLES THAT BROKE RECORDS IN OUR LIFETIME



GAMES™ MEMORIES



"It doesn't get much better than issue 100 for me, including two of my favourites that I've ever produced. The first was an amazing interview with Mr Street Fighter himself, Yoshinori Ono, which culminated in me literally beating him at his own game. The other, a comprehensive *Burnout 3* retrospective, involved a day with the team going over mountains of original design documents, playing early builds of the game, talking for hours about every aspect of the classic racer, and even learning of a cancelled project that had never been revealed before. Access doesn't get much better than that…

LUKE ALBIGÉS, FORMER GAMES EDITOR

In a flea-bitten lecture theatre delivering a session for game design students, I encountered an angry and almost tearful Brendan McNamara – creator of *LA Noire* – fresh from his drubbing and ejection by Rockstar.

It was one of the most honest and emotional interviews I ever had the fortune to carry out in games, made ever the more poignant and jarring for the fact that last time we'd met had been on a sound stage in LA, as half the cast of *Mad Men* strolled through to finish filming pickups on McNamara's magnum opus.

PETER GOTHARD, FORMER NEWS EDITOR





What I most fondly remember about my time at **games™** is the opportunity it gave me to talk with the talented individuals whose art shaped my passion for gaming. But while I take great pride in the questions I asked, the interview that stands out is the one in which I said nothing at all. Issue 135 of **games™** featured old friends Ian Livingstone and Peter Molyneux interviewing each other, swapping development war stories and playfully ribbing each other's careers. After decades in the industry, their continued passion for the future of the medium was an affirming testament to the continued power of gaming.

DAVE SCARBOROUGH,
FORMER FEATURES EDITOR

I remember putting together issue one of games™ well. We knew we wanted the *Splinter Cell* image – it was both striking with its green hue and stark around the edges to make the coverlines stand out. I remember we spent a long time playing around with positioning, wanting the magazine to be very obvious which systems it was covering, but the list of consoles always got obscured by the artwork. In the end I lined up "XBOX Vs GAMECUBE VS PS2" through the centre of the art, and it just clicked! I'm very proud of that cover.

NICK ROBERTS,
LAUNCH MANAGING EDITOR



Writing about games for a living is a dream job, and I consider it a privilege that I was able to get away with doing just that for six years on **games™**! In that time, I interviewed Shigeru Miyamoto in a swanky London hotel, took photos of Suda51 reading **games™** on the toilet, staged an awkward photoshoot between Yuji Naka and Takashi Iizuka, in which I swear the former made very up-close kissy faces at the latter. Most of all though, I feel so lucky that I got to work in an office full of like-minded gamers. While the memories are full of ups and downs, those friendships have been a continuous peak. Thanks, **games™**!

ASHLEY DAY, FORMER DEPUTY EDITOR





My year editing **games™** was 2013, leading up to the new console launches. E3 2013 was huge. At Sony's conference, *Destiny* made a huge splash, but the killing blow was the price of the PS4, undercutting the Xbox One by £75. This bold 'PS4 wins' post-E3 cover on issue 137 got a big reaction from readers, and in retrospect tells the entire story of PS4 vs Xbox One – I was 25 when I edited this, and just looking at it makes me remember how much fire I had in me at the time. I'm very tired now.

SAMUEL ROBERTS,
FORMER EDITOR



Perhaps my favourite memory of my time on the mag was also one of the toughest. During a change of ownership, a skeleton staff were tasked with keeping the magazine on time, and to do so in half the time of a normal issue. It was brutal, intense and, at times, seemingly impossible, but a team of dedicated writers, editors and designers bonded and pulled the issue together, somehow. It's not the best issue of **games™**, the *OutRun Coast 2 Coast* cover, but in my time at least, it's the most meaningful.

JON DENTON,
FORMER GAMES EDITOR

I got sent to Kiev for the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* press event in 2006. The night before we travelled to Chernobyl for a tour of the abandoned city of Pripyat, there was talk among journalists in the hotel bar about what the symptoms of radiation sickness were, and whether we would have been sent if there was any risk. As we waited for the coach in the morning, 2K reps began to distribute sheets for us to sign: it was a disclaimer, that if we became ill or died following our visit, 2K would not be liable. I remember looking around and wondering whether it was just a hangover that made people pale.

BEN BIGGS,
FORMER STAFF WRITER





I think **games™**'s credibility, for me, was established early on when we gave *Metroid Prime* a 10/10 in only the second issue. Management argued against it – 'You can't do that so early! Change it to a 9!' – but we stood our ground, and the score stayed. For us, it was about celebrating quality and being true to ourselves, not cowing to external pressure. That's probably why we got blacklisted by several publishers more than a few times over the years…

MARTIN MATHERS,
FORMER EDITOR



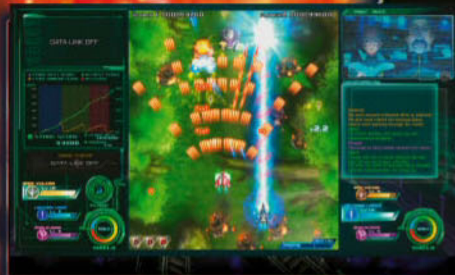
I've numerous memories of my time on **games™**. They range from waking up in a London hospital after a particularly manic *NBA Jam* press event, to a ridiculously excessive trip to New York that I still bore everybody about today. My lasting memory though is officially taking over the Retro section from issue 19, as it not only allowed me to contact many fascinating developers from my childhood, including Jon Ritman and David Braben, but also led to me being headhunted to helm *Retro Gamer*, something I still do to this day.

DARRAN JONES,
FORMER RETRO EDITOR

PS4'S MOST EXPLOSIVE SHOOT 'EM UP!

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- AWE-INSPIRING WEAPONRY
- EPIC BRANCHING LEVELS



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Reviews

68 **Assassin's Creed Origins**
PS4, Xbox One, PC

72 **Call Of Duty: WWII**
PS4, Xbox One, PC

74 **Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds**
PS4

75 **Echo**
PS4, PC

75 **Fire Emblem Warriors**
Switch

76 **The Evil Within 2**
PS4, Xbox One, PC

78 **GT Sport**
PS4

80 **Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus**
PS4, Xbox One, PC

82 **South Park: The Fractured But Whole**
PS4, Xbox One, PC

83 **AER: Memories Of Old**
PS4, PC

83 **Golf Story**
Switch

84 **FIFA 18 Switch**
Switch

84 **Ruiner**
PS4, Xbox One PC



68

ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

Ubisoft has delved deeper into the past than ever before, but has it found some of the old Creed magic buried there?

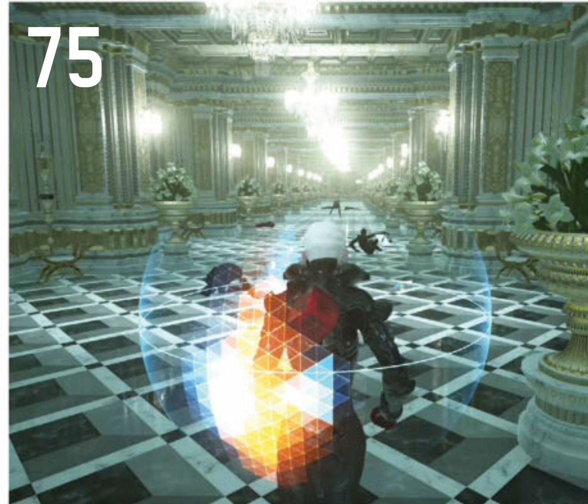


THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.

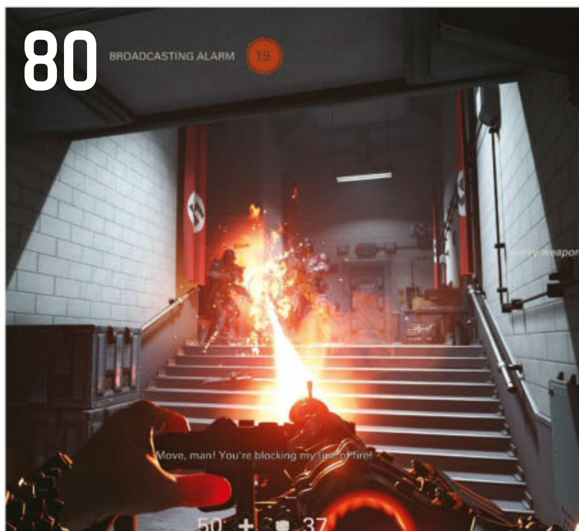












AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

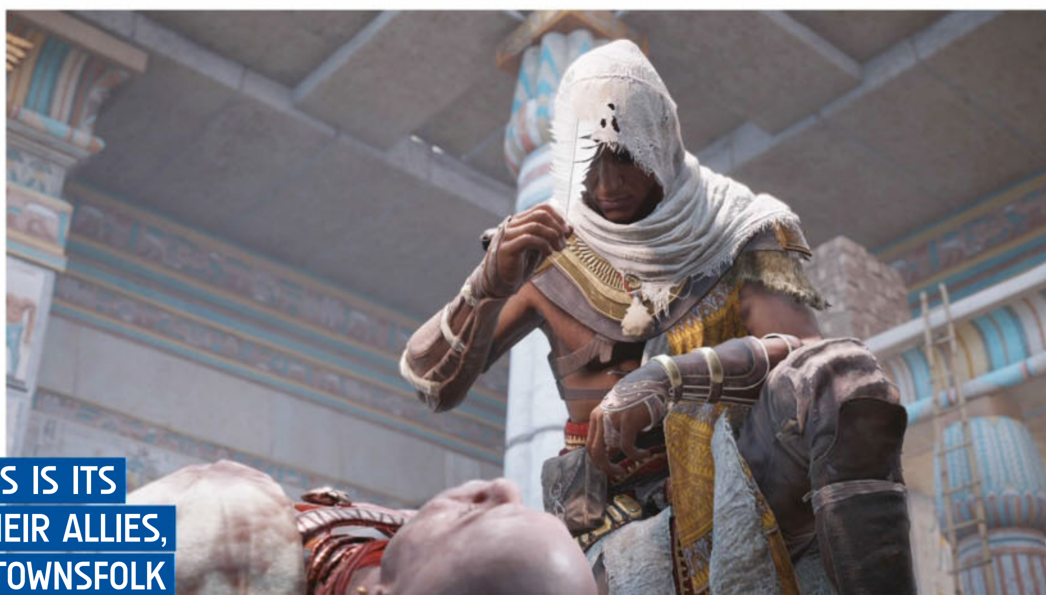
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#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright

I GOT THE POWER

The first time you stumble upon the Abilities menu, there's a chance you'll be as overwhelmed as we were. Given you need up to three Ability Points to unlock some skills, it doesn't take long to realise exactly how long you're expected to be here, grinding it up and putting Bayek through his paces. But worry not; you'll eventually find your rhythm, and seek out the best skills – be they passive or otherwise – to suit your particular brand of Assassin. Our top picks include an ability to directly control the projection of your arrows, the power to tame beasts out in the wild, and the ability to assassinate foes from below – a skill curiously missing from Bayek's standard toolbox.



AT THE CORE OF ORIGINS IS ITS PEOPLE; BAYEK, AYA, THEIR ALLIES, THEIR ENEMIES, THEIR TOWNSFOLK



SO MUCH DIGITALLY GENERATED CHEST HAIR

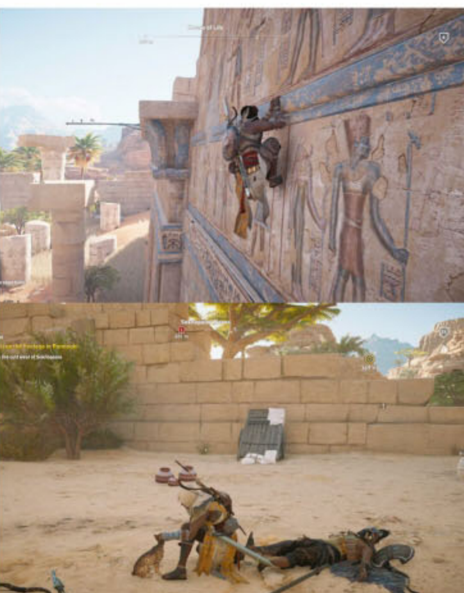
Assassin's Creed Origins

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Left: In a series noted for its attention to detail in world design, *Origins* stands out as one of the best examples to date. This setting has given the team some great locations to play with.





Left: Cats are sacred beings in ancient Egypt. They're also every bit as standoffish and aloof as their modern-day cousins, so if you get to catch one, you're very honoured indeed.

Egypt's living, breathing world ticks by regardless of how much – or how little – you interact with it. Sit on the shore for a while, and you may see a crocodile chance its luck against a hippo in the shallow waters. Take pause at the precipice of a craggy canyon, and you might catch a wandering villager below get jumped by a passing trio of hyenas. Trot past a farm, and you could find a scattering of animal corpses at your feet, ripe for the (loot) picking, a local bandit – or rogue predator – having already moved on to the next target.

People go about their daily lives here; they shop, talk, argue, hunt, travel, work, cook, live and die. You can get involved if you want – as saint or sinner, it's your choice – but it's not obligatory: life, and death, persists with or without your interference.

From the highest mountain to the lowest sunken treasure, every inch of *Assassin's Creed Origins*' Egypt is breathtaking in scope and scale. It's to Ubisoft's credit that the sun-bleached stones and lush, vibrant flora have become so par for the course for an Assassin's Creed game that it's simply expected now, and we perhaps don't give Creed's astonishing environments the acclaim they deserve. You owe it to yourself to get out into that world and explore – it's what the in-game photo mode was made for. Sure, we all have hot takes on the bugs and glitches of Creed games past; the tropes and mistakes have dominated column inches and Reddit posts in recent years, perhaps prompting Ubisoft to dampen its hitherto fervent release schedule. But sit back and take in the view, Assassin; overlooking *Origins*' stunning sets does a disservice to the series in more ways than one.

The real magic lies not in its main story, but in the secrets skilfully scaffolded into the vignettes and shadows around it. Ubisoft has always led from the front with this, with both the Assassin and Far Cry series painting huge digital playgrounds for us to play in, but never has it tried anything with this kind of scale before. Yes, there's Pyramids, but there's so much more here; for every rich, opulent town you encounter, there's a dozen scrublands, swamps, deserts, plantations, tombs and farms to explore, not to mention the bloodshed of the arenas, or the adrenaline-fuelled chariot racing of the Hippodrome.

You might not feel like exploring when you first step into protagonist Bayek's shoes, though. The map is huge, and as you traipse through Siwa and head to Alexandria, you'll wonder what the hell you're doing, taking on a game so huge. As you race through territories guarded by enemies that are level 28 to your novice level 5, it's all too easy to feel swamped; the odds seem stacked against you.

Stick with it, Assassin. Leading man Bayek's story is a heartfelt one, a tale of rage and revenge and the endless pursuit of Doing The Right Thing while taking on people who do anything but. If you paid attention to history in school (or watched *Horrible Histories*, we suppose) there are names you'll recognise amongst *Origins*' cast, and Bayek's affable charm and easy manner make him one of Creed's most likable leads, a principled character that believes in retribution, but will nevertheless take time out from all that ass-whooping to perform leaps of faith for awed children.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BIGGER WORLD, GREATER CHALLENGES: *Origins* is the biggest and best *Assassin's Creed* game yet, stuffed with a smorgasbord of secrets buried high and low throughout its impressive world.

The series is famed for its seamless parkour, and we're delighted to report that it's as robust as ever. Bayek moves effortlessly from pole to wall to whatever (with the exception of windows – for some reason, this freaks him out), and while he'll occasionally do something you didn't plan (like plummeting from the top of a tower instead of commencing the careful descent you'd hoped), for the most part his exploration is as effortless as the world painted around you.

Is it perfect? Alas, no. NPCs will recycle the same old phrases – an irritant, when you're 40-hours deep and have heard the same line literally dozens of times before – and you'll see the same faces pop up again and again. There's looping NPC speech, occasional dialogue issues (once, an entire

side mission was delivered completely devoid of speech, not even subtitles), not-so-occasional mechanical glitches in which Bayek loops an animation over and over, and popping assets, with trees and shrubs magically shooting up in front of you. But given you can canvas the entire map without a single loading screen, this is forgivable. The three times we experienced a hard crash, on the other hand? That's less so.

It's a long quest, though, and you'll be prevented from speed-running, as main quests come with a recommended level sometimes several ranks above your current one. Trying to take them on when you're under-level isn't impossible, but it's not advisable; get caught, and you'll get killed. End of. Part of us wants to say that though long, it's an enjoyable journey, but we suspect the campaign is maybe half a dozen hours longer than it needed to be, a single playthrough clocking in at a substantial 50-60 hours.

There are endless side missions, too. And while many fall into similar patterns of go here, do this, get him, return there, they're varied enough keep the stain of repetition at bay… just (and there's no longer any tailing missions – yay!). *Origins* also isn't ashamed to short-cut some of the more tedious parts of open-world play, so while riding through Egypt might be interesting for the first 1,000 metres or so, you can expedite the process by instructing your mount to Follow Road and automatically ride along; a neat touch, right? Oh, and if you're ever wondering where the hell you last parked your camel (or unicorn – yep, really) it will magically appear wherever you are with a summoning whistle.

Combat remains one of the weakest aspects of the game, regrettably. Though Bayek's equipped with a huge assortment of weapons, both close-range and long, the mechanics of fighting – remapped since previous iterations – remains adequate at best, and clumsy at worst, particularly in boss fights or when you're beset by swarms of guards. Thankfully, it's not impossible to side-step a lot of this, especially if you favour life as a 'lover not a fighter' kind of assassin. Build up your abilities – neatly divided into Hunter, Warrior and Seer, all with essential passive and active abilities – and you'll be able to boost your chances of slipping in and out of a restricted area unseen.

There's also extra challenges by way of *Assassin*'s now staple investigations, which task you to survey a small area in search of clues to uncover a mystery. They get less interesting the more you do them (especially when you learn you can use your highlighter to instantly reveal all) but hey, we all need a break from ball-busting, even Bayek, apparently (although if ball-busting's your favourite way to pass the time, feel free to head to the Krokodilopolis Arena).

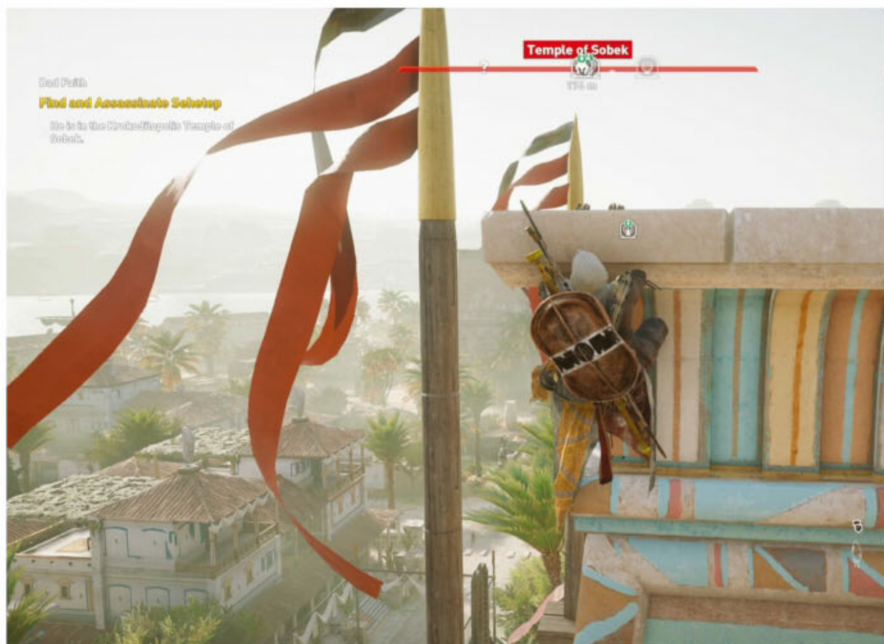
Crafting isn't as intuitive as it could have been, either. Some icons are peculiarly similar, which means differentiating between soft or hard leather is cumbersome, and we were dozens of hours into the game before we realised the brown acorn thing we needed to upgrade our hidden blade was actually bronze. Yes, we're stupid, granted, but a little explanation would have helped, too.

FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE ACCESSIBILITY?
The subtitles are differentiated from the background and big enough to read without your nose touching the screen. HUZZAH.

Q. UNLOCK MY UNICORN?
Head to the store, cough up 500H, and she's all yours. Enjoy your rainbow streamers, friends.

Q. TIME TO COMPLETION?
Depending on how many side missions you tackle, you're looking at 50-60 hours for a single playthrough.



Right: It's always worth looking up in the world of *Assassin's Creed*; restricted areas may look impenetrable on the ground, but up above there many be a cheeky window or balcony with your name on it. Senu can help you plan your entrance.

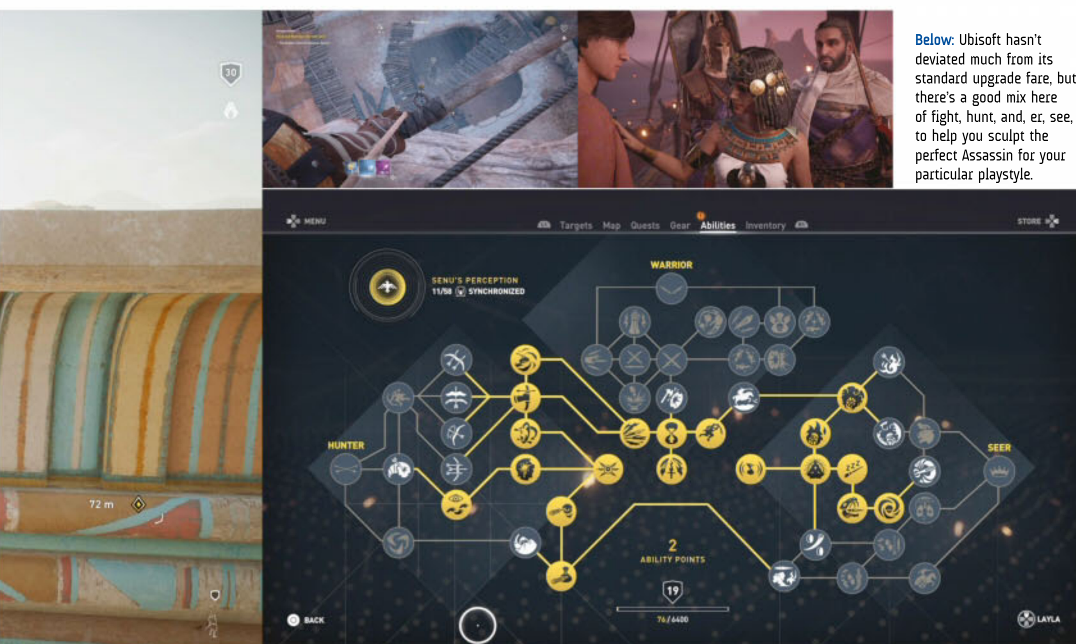






Above: Your flying companion Senu can do most (well, some) of the hard work for you; send him up to scout nearby forts and restricted areas and he'll tag unsuspecting foes and key items.

CREEPING UP THE OUTER WALL, TAMPERING WITH BRAZIERS, SILENTLY MOVING FROM COVER TO COVER – IT'S ASSASSIN'S CREED AT ITS BEST



Below: Ubisoft hasn't deviated much from its standard upgrade fare, but there's a good mix here of fight, hunt, and, er, see, to help you sculpt the perfect Assassin for your particular playstyle.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



We're a little overwhelmed – bloody hell, this map is *massive* – but we'd probably be further into the main story if we didn't keep stopping to admire the view.

3 HOURS



Wait, we've only just reached the Credit sequence? Are you kidding? But we've been playing for hours! We guess this means this is a monster of a game then, right?

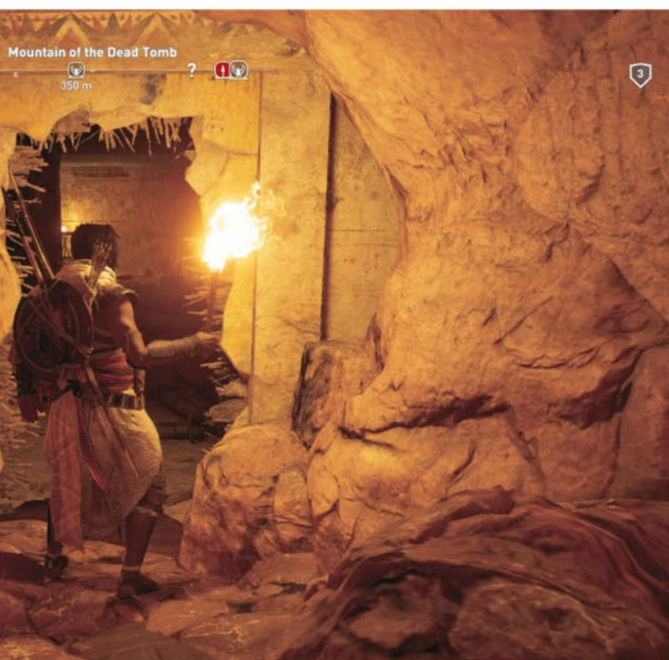
6 DAYS



It's taken 60 glorious hours, but we've finally beaten the main campaign. Given we haven't touched half the side missions, forts, or Phylakes yet, here's to the next 60 hours...

LEVELLING UP

Beyond a cursory introduction to upgrading Bayek's breastplate – a means of boosting our man's health – you're mostly left to work out how to boost your stuff (hidden blade strength, arrow capacity, ranged weapon power, melee damage, health, and tool capacity) on your own. While all are important, we reckon you should initially focus on improving your hidden blade strength and ranged weapon power, as these are the skills you'll rely on most when stealthily tackling a fort. Keep an eye out for passing herds of deer, the cackle of hyenas, and the deep rumble of a covert crocodile; you'll constantly need the spoils of these fights to level up. Revisit lower level areas like Siwa, too, to ambush soldiers transporting precious metal.



That said, if you've spent any time with RPG-esque games like *Diablo* or *Destiny*, the loot system colour-coding of blue, purple and gold should help you determine what's good. There's a variety for myriad combat styles, so experimentation is key; try everything that falls in your hands to determine what weapon suits your playstyle best.

Creeping up an outer wall, tampering with the braziers, silently moving from cover to cover, smoothly taking out enemies as we go, concealing the bodies; it's something you have to do a lot, but it's still *Origins* at its best, and we never tire of it. Especially when you level up a bit, go back and kick the arse of the bastard that cheerfully stabbed you a few hours ago...

As the Assassin's Creed series celebrates ten years, *Origins* feels paradoxically both new and familiar, and more than once, we're reminded of Far Cry. Many times, the lines between the series blur thanks to the abundance of forts (camps), viewpoints (towers) and civilian rescues (the same in both games – they're denoted by similar icons).

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TWIN STICKS: After *Syndicate*'s twin protags (literally), it would've been good to spend more time as Aya, particularly as traversing the world sans Senu ramps up the challenge...

Oh, there's Animus stuff too, of course. Yes, it jars the flow of the game (we forgot it was missing until we were yanked out of Bayek's story and introduced to Layla), and yes, it still feels as clumsily tacked on as ever. It's a nod to the game's roots, but more than ever, it feels unnecessary. If you didn't know the lore behind it beforehand, this glimpse in *Origins* does nothing to aid this, and if you knew about it before, it doesn't bring much added valued. Take a good long look through the files on the laptop, though. Just sayin'.

At the core of *Origins* is its people; Bayek, Aya, their allies, their enemies, their townsfolk. Every side mission is another strand in the rich tapestry of their lives, another brief glimpse into the loves and losses of those around you. For all its opulence and excess, life in Egypt at this time is not an easy one, and danger lies everywhere. It's a world awash with grief as much as grandiosity, with constant reminders of the Egyptians' unflinching belief in higher powers, your map littered with temples to the Gods, and many side missions dedicated to helping others reconcile, or avenge, an untimely familial abduction or death.

Not all mechanical choices work – whoever decided that the waypoint icons on a predominantly yellow map should be white and, er, a slightly darker yellow, needs a stern talking to – and some irritating glitches persist, but the good here way outweighs the bad, and it's been some time since we've been able to say that so readily – so happily – about an Assassin's Creed game. Enjoy exploring Bayek's world – we certainly did.

VERDICT 9/10

THE BEST ASSASSIN'S CREED EXPERIENCE IN YEARS.

WORLD WAR II... WORLD WAR II NEVER CHANGES

Call Of Duty: WWII

A return to the old-fashioned Call Of Duty experience means… well, a return to old-fashioned war. But pick away ever so slightly at the surface and *Call Of Duty: WWII* quickly reveals itself to be little more than a reskin of the modern – and futuristic – shooter we know and, frankly, are getting a little bored of playing. Functional and inoffensive (mechanics-wise; your mileage with the World War II content may vary), it gets the job done where you'd expect, but leaves a surprisingly empty feeling after a fair few hours of play.

While *Call Of Duty: WWII* does take place in the conflict that ran from 1939 to 1945, the game's campaign picks up in 1944 onwards. Obviously this is so it can begin on D-Day and introduce a whole new generation of gamers to the horrors of the Normandy beach landings, like so many were back in the early days of COD and Medal Of Honor. Unfortunately, this is where things start to prove underwhelming – and just to reiterate, this is the very first level we're talking about.

Your death-defying run up an intensely hostile beach is peppered with canned cutscenes and forced shock moments, as well as being just very easy to get through. The spectacle is there, but it's immediately apparent that there's very little soul behind the eyes. After almost single-handedly taking out the German defences at Normandy, players progress through a year or so of World War II, taking place over around a dozen missions. It's generally a case of formulaic, by-the-numbers FPS action that doesn't even pretend to bother the likes of *Titanfall 2* or *Wolfenstein 2: The New Colossus* with regards to quality, captivating story or uniqueness.

That's not to say *WWII*'s campaign is without merit, though – it's mostly passable, if completely unspectacular, but there are moments where it rises up to be something more. Namely a mission where, taking control of a member of the French Resistance, you infiltrate a Nazi outpost. Dressed as the enemy, players aren't forced to sneak around, but instead must answer challenges from a few carefully placed SS and Gestapo troopers, requiring them to quickly recall their cover story information and repeat it in order to not receive a bullet-shaped reprimand. It's not the greatest of things – for one, the questions are very easy if you've paid even the slightest bit of attention – but it brings a change of pace to a game that is otherwise a cumbersome assault on the senses.

As you thread your way through the campaign, you'll be taken along for the ride on a story that offers some gorgeous cut scenes and fine performance capture, but little else. The tale told is one anybody will be able to predict the outcome of, and there's nothing here that will surprise or really engage on any level. That's almost understandable in a way – this is World War II, there are only so many stories that can be told when you're keeping things set firmly in reality – but there's nothing

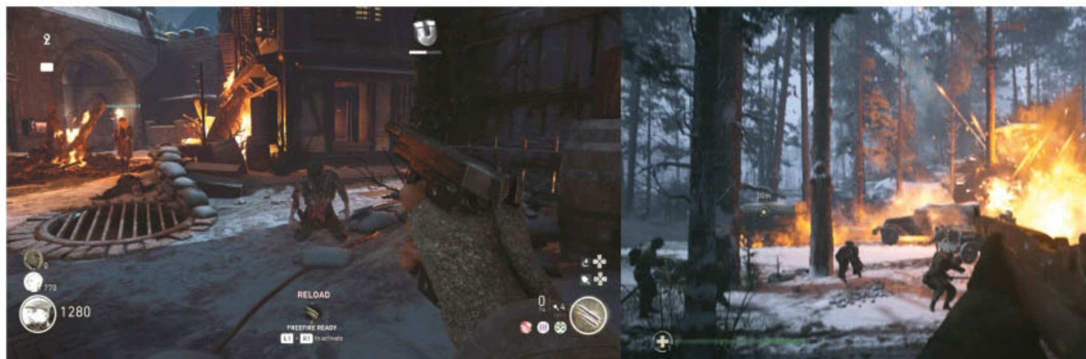
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Sledgehammer Games
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-48
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: Naturally, the big draw for *WWII* is multiplayer, but it's something of a mixed bag this year. Your straightforward deathmatches are honed in the classic COD fashion, but some issues of bottlenecking and camping spoil otherwise potentially great modes like War.



Above: There's the odd vehicular distraction throughout the campaign, with the aerial battle proving a case of gorgeous skies and… not much else.



Above: While Nazi Zombies might feel out of place with 'respect' plastered everywhere in *WWII*, there's no denying it's a great deal of fun with friends.



YOU'RE REQUIRED TO QUICKLY RECALL YOUR COVER STORY AND REPEAT IT IN ORDER TO NOT RECEIVE A BULLET-SHAPED REPRIMAND





FAQs

Q. LOOT BOX BANK DRAIN?

We'll have to see – at launch loot boxes are only available via in-game, earned currency and unlock at a reasonable rate.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?

The campaign can easily be clocked in six hours or so, but multiplayer might keep your attention indefinitely. That's a big might.

Q. FLAMING SHOTGUN ROUNDS?

Naturally. In the single-player campaign. Which is supposed to be historically accurate. Ah well.



WHEN THERE'S NO MORE ROOM IN WWII

Zombies makes its return in *WWII* featuring an all-star cast – including David Tennant, for some reason – and it can be a lot of fun in the right circumstances. Playing out in a more linear, objective-focused fashion, it doesn't lend itself well to being played alongside strangers, but grab three friends and you're onto a winner. Using 'jolts' to unlock new weapons and powers is familiar enough, while the series of objectives to complete while the zombie horde becomes stronger and stronger is intense at the best moments. Admittedly it's a bit sparse, with only one (large) map available at the outset, but as this mode grows it might well become – once again – one of the most popular aspects of a Call Of Duty game.



else layered on top of the story. We hazard to reference *Band Of Brothers*, as it's the go-to for any comparison of wartime tales, but the fact is it really is *that good*. *Call Of Duty: WWII* is a vague facsimile of the superb template laid out by the show, littering its yarn with unlikeable – barely knowable – characters, and more black and white decisions than a game of backgammon. It is entirely forgettable and, considering how much money Activision has clearly spent on the campaign, a sad state of affairs – this could, and should, have been so much more impactful, engaging and emotional. Instead, it's just another *Pearl Harbour*. The Michael Bay film, that is.

Multiplayer is of course the mode everyone will be talking about, with Sledgehammer – and all the studios involved in *WWII*'s development – adding and tweaking the quick-paced run-and-get-shot MP mode we all know and love/tolerate. Classes have changed to divisions – don't let the name change confuse you, this is classes under a different banner. Destiny has been raided for its between-game hub, with headquarters allowing up to 48 players to mingle around base camp, emoting at each other, taking part in shooting range activities and generally wasting time until they get back into the main MP game. Oh, and opening loot boxes.

The big new meaty addition comes in the form of the objective-based War mode, which sees opposing sides moving to attack/defend, protect/steal, build/stop building and so on. It's a mode with a lot of potential, but it's also one we've seen more than a fair few bottlenecks and impassable objectives popping up in. The Operation Breakout map, for example, features a bridge that is nigh-on impossible to build by the Allies – genuinely, we played two dozen games on the map and never saw it completed. Maybe it will be fixed in an update – maybe it has by the time you read this – but it doesn't fill you with confidence when a glaring issue like this rears its head so quickly into your online stay.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PRIVATE RYAN: You can't expect *COD* to tell the world's greatest story, but with so much effort – and cash – put into it, a more unique, interesting tale wouldn't go amiss.

Call Of Duty: WWII doesn't surprise in any way – the campaign not being daring and falling back on FPS tropes we'd had enough of the last time COD was in World War II doesn't surprise. Multiplayer offering a mix of solid highs and bewildering lows doesn't surprise. Loot boxes littering your headquarters don't surprise. And the fact that you'll either settle for *COD*'s same-again multiplayer offerings or give up after just a few hours doesn't surprise. Creatively empty and functionally adequate, so long as this series keeps on making money there'll never be a reason for it to be anything other than what it is. And that doesn't surprise.

VERDICT 6/10

WAR ISN'T HELL, BUT IT IS THOROUGHLY FORMULAIC

COLD WORLD, WARM HEART

Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds

***Horizon* plays around with your sense of danger really well.** It was true of the original release, back in February, and this expansion is a great reminder to any players who have put in the hours to surpass level 45 of what some of those earlier, first-time encounters against unknown machines really felt like. *The Frozen Wilds* doesn't change the formula of the game very much, but it's a meaty, well-paced extension to a world that we thoroughly enjoy spending time in.

The Frozen Wilds introduces us to The Cut, a region north of Grave-Hoard that was previously inaccessible, and that turns out to be the primary home of one of *Horizon*'s most mysterious and colourful tribes, the Banuk. If you've played through the main game then you'll be familiar enough with their bright paintings and murals, scattered throughout the region. You'll also know that their relationship to the machines is a little unusual, in that they revere them more than most, even weaving their wires into their own skin. They also appear to be associated with your regular guide Sylens, whose origins he has kept from you for most of the game.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Netherlands
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Guerrilla Games
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





Above: New weapons and outfits give you just enough incentive to keep pushing forward. The Banuk bows add an interesting new feature of delivering additional damage the longer you hold your aim.

So everything is set up nicely for this additional 12 hours (or longer depending on how thorough you want to be and how slowly you like to take combat) of story content. The first thing to say, which is probably the least startling piece of information, is that *The Frozen Wilds* is a stunning looking expansion. The Cut is covered in snow drifts that crumple beautifully under your feet, is often experiencing snowfall and, thanks to a volcano in the middle of the map, has some stunning skylines to enjoy. Anyone who has played around with the Photo Mode in *Horizon* before has tonnes to play with again here. And the new machines add a welcome new challenge to the game. Their introduction means less certainty in how you should tackle an engagement, and the expansion feels like a healthy step up in challenge for anyone who has taken Aloy above level 40 or so.

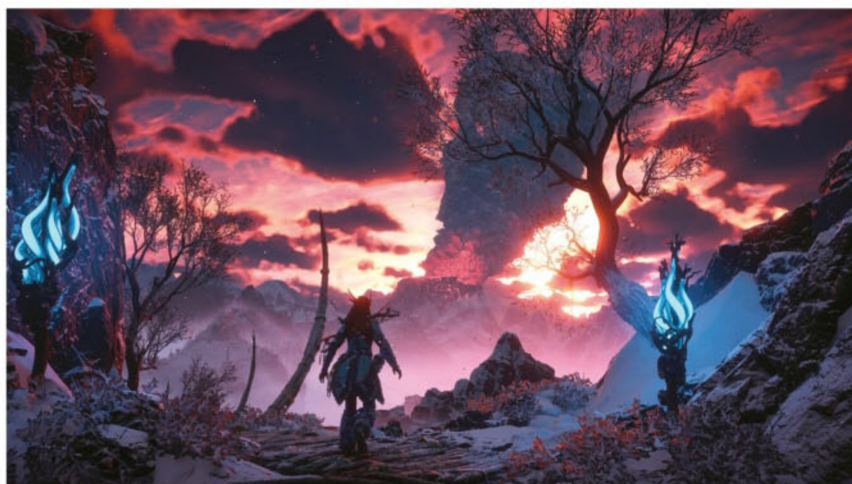
That all being said, *The Frozen Wilds* isn't introducing too much that is genuinely new or a change of formula. If all you really needed was more of that which you enjoyed in *Horizon*, then you'll absolutely love this addition. There are a few small things like some new weapons (bows that deliver increased damage the longer you aim), a new tradable item in the form of Bluegleam and some new collectables, thanks to various colour pigments you see around the world and trade in for reward boxes. All-in-all, it's more of the same, and that's really just fine by us.

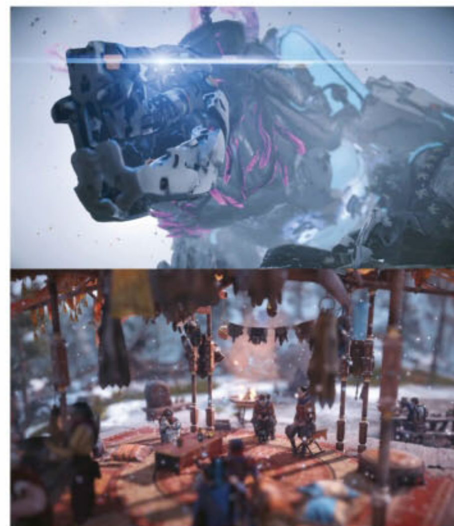
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

THREAT FACTOR: The introduction of new, even more powerful machines gives this expansion the added threat it needs to keep veteran players on their toes. Facing off against these machines was always tense on first encounter as you suss out their weaknesses and attack patterns.

VERDICT 8/10
MORE OF WHAT YOU LOVE





Above: *The Frozen Wilds* is a Photo Mode goldmine. As well as adding some new poses to Aloy's modelling repertoire, The Cut and the surrounding mountains are absolutely gorgeous. If you're into taking in-game images, you'll love this expansion.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Omega Force/ Team Ninja
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

THE HEROES OF FIRE EMBLEM JOIN THE BATTLE

Fire Emblem Warriors

The mainline Dynasty Warriors games may remain divisive, but their licensed spin-offs take the series' strengths and mix them with some of the core ideas behind the games it merges with. *Fire Emblem Warriors* takes the things we know and love about Fire Emblem – the relationships between the characters, the strategic battles and the 'rock, paper, scissors' approach to combat – and throws them in the pot.

As expected, the game is broken up into a series of large scale battlefields full of enemy soldiers that are little more than fodder, with only the named, more powerful ones truly causing any kind of threat. The Fire Emblem strategy stuff comes into play as you gain more characters from the series to bring into battle, each with their own abilities. From the pause screen you can send them off to take on certain objectives - or even take control of them to finish the job yourself. Again, like the strategy titles, Sword beats Axe, Axe beats Spear and Spear beats Sword, so you have to pick your team based on the battle ahead - brute force only works for so long. As the game gets harder, you have to think more about who exactly is doing what job. It's a nice nod to the Fire Emblem games, and manages to freshen up the Dynasty Warriors formula without watering it down.

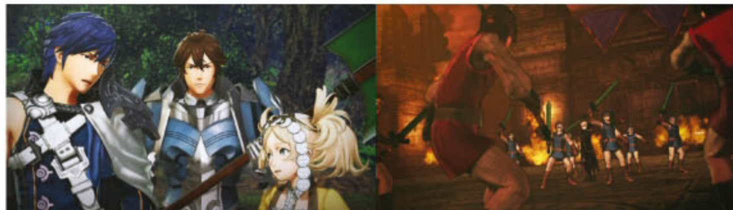
The series' relationships blossom on the battlefield by curing other characters and using the 'pair-up' mechanic, allowing for two characters to support one another with attacks and buffs, which in turn become more effective the tighter the link is between the two characters being used.

Slicing up an army remains fun, but those who are left wanting by the Warriors games will find something with a bit more meat on its bones here. Fire Emblem fans will get a kick out of not only seeing their favourite characters once again, but also out of the way it blends that series' mechanics with Dynasty Warriors trademark horde slaying.

BETTER THAN DYNASTY WARRIORS 8



WORSE THAN HYRULE WARRIORS



Above: The whole crew is here, from recent favourites like Frederick and Chrom, to some deeper cuts from earlier games. The plot is barebones, but allows for a lot of interesting cameo appearances and varied classes to be utilised.

VERDICT 7/10
A FUN MEDLEY OF DW-STYLE COMBAT AND STRATEGY.

OVERCOME YOUR WORST ENEMY... YOURSELF

Echo

***Echo* takes us on a sci-fi action adventure that gives us the power to decide how we interact with the enemy.** By implementing intelligent and unforgiving AI systems that learn from our play style, Ultra Ultra has created an intriguing and challenging experience. While much is left unsaid about the protagonist, En, and her past, we are impressed by how the mixture of resentment and respect flows so naturally in her conversations with a character that we never meet. Despite its alien setting, *Echo* appeals to our emotions and human prerequisite for companionship. As a result, we found ourselves greatly anticipating the intermissions between objectives, in which the majority of the story unfolds.

Whether we choose to be stealthy or aggressive, every action has a consequence. Thinking on our feet is essential as the Palace operates on a strict cycle. Periodically recording, rebooting and arming the enemies with our gestures, the Palace creates a hostile environment that conditions us to perform a careful run in order to achieve an objective. The AI follow somewhat simplistic patterns, but will surround us quickly if disturbed. While this is a unique concept that Ultra Ultra continues to build on as we progress, it isn't quite enough to alleviate the repetitiveness of the game's structure. Despite its short duration, *Echo* consists of a few objectives that are recycled throughout. Although the difficulty increases each time, the lack of variety in each area of the Palace is slightly disappointing, making it appealing to take breaks often.

If you're looking for a stealthy title with persistent and adaptive AI *Echo* is a sound pick. It sets out to reward those who are cautious, alert and patient, providing us with the tools to create our own personalised experience. A few performance hiccups left us either frozen or infinitely falling through the Palace. These instances were easily fixed with a quick restart but were inconvenient, and frequent enough to demand some attention in a future patch. Nonetheless, En's determination and relatable mission are likely enough to keep you skulking through the Palace, and into further unlockable modes, thereafter.

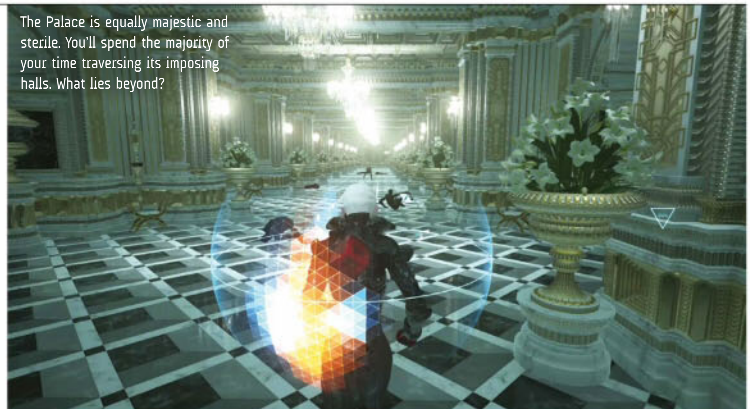
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: Ultra Ultra
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £18.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN 2DARK



WORSE THAN ALIEN: ISOLATION



The Palace is equally majestic and sterile. You'll spend the majority of your time traversing its imposing halls. What lies beyond?

VERDICT 6/10
A UNIQUE TAKE ON A STEALTH EXPERIENCE.



Above: The game focuses on saving your not-actually-dead daughter Lily from a shady organisation

BETTER UNSAFE THAN SORRY

The Evil Within 2

The differences between *The Evil Within* and *The Evil Within 2* are neatly illustrated by Sebastian Castellanos himself. In the first game, he wore a waistcoat, tie, pin-stripe shirt and old-fashioned revolver. He looked distinctive. You could identify him, right away, as the guy from *The Evil Within*. In this second game, this much milder, safer, typically-behaving second game, he has the same kind of beard as Joel from *The Last of Us*, Nathan Drake's holster and just an average-looking pistol. He's a generic videogame man. Taken out of context, he could pass for the hero of any third-person shooter released over the past ten years.

Such is this sequel. Where *The Evil Within* was too long, badly-written and unenjoyably difficult, it was also stark, idiosyncratic and had something like an aesthetic of its own – you could sense Shinji Mikami's authorship. *The Evil Within 2* is more like your average game, or at least a composite of games that are popular already. Its visuals and sets are heavily inspired by (or if you prefer, "copied from") *Layers Of Fear* and *P.T.* Its stealth sections are like *Alien: Isolation*'s, and the quasi-open-world areas come straight from Deus Ex. Perfectly, inoffensively playable, *The Evil Within 2* contains hardly a surprising moment. It feels almost like an apology for making the first game too strange or inaccessible. Personally, when it's horror that we're dealing with, and we expect to be shocked, or at least stirred, we'd prefer something not quite so safe.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER: Tango Gameworks
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: NA

Tango Gameworks, this time around, seems anxious about discomforting us too much. *The Evil Within 2*'s plot, which unfortunately and unnecessarily maintains the first game's central conceit, whereby all the horror takes place not in the real-world but a computer simulation, drowns in exposition. All the characters are given some kind of strained back story. Every visual abstraction – each bold, surrealist moment – is boringly explained away via the context of virtual reality. You can almost imagine the designers anticipating, neurotically, potential complaints from fans, and going through a checklist to make sure every aspect of *The Evil Within 2* is iterated upon since the first game, and is now airtight: Sebastian has a personal motivation in the form of his missing daughter, the game world behaves consistently and all the bad guys are defeated by the end. On paper, this sounds like good writing. In reality, it means lengthy dialogues and found letters and diaries that repeatedly clarify how the in-game universe functions, and who all the characters are. It leads to a procedural and verveless experience, a doubling back on the eccentricity

THE EVIL WITHIN 2 FEELS LIKE A CONCESSION TO AN ARCHETYPAL VIDEOGAME CONSUMER

FAQs

Q. IS IT OPEN-WORLD?
Occasionally you're left to explore *The Evil Within 2*'s overarching hub world, but it's very small and contains only a handful of side missions. Size-wise, it's no Fallout.

Q. IS IT SCARY?
Scarcity of ammunition and a camera that's tight against the character's shoulder help *The Evil Within 2* feel suspenseful and claustrophobic. It's not scary, but it's definitely tense.

Q. IS IT DIFFICULT?
If you want, you can set it to be as hard as the first game. By default, though, *The Evil Within 2* is a lot easier.



Below: The game has the same claustrophobic feel as the first to keep you on edge in small spaces



GUNNING NOT RUNNING

One common approach to horror games is to take away all the players' guns and force us to run and hide from monsters instead of fight, the idea being to make us feel more vulnerable. Sometimes, though, that dynamic can devolve into almost-slapstick. You don't have to play cleverly in *Outlast* or *Amnesia*; just hold down the sprint button, and keep reloading the level until you discover the correct way out. *The Evil Within 2* demonstrates that having guns can actually make you more frightened. When it gives you a pistol, you know you're going to have to use it, and you start to imagine what against. It's that implied responsibility, to turn and face something rather than flee from it, that's fearsome.



of the original game that leaves no room for questions, ambiguousness or surprise. It's like Tango Gameworks, presumably concerned by the criticisms levied at the original *The Evil Within*, has become determined that we players, this time, feel accommodated and thought-of.

From its forensically explained plot to its open-world sections, almost everything about *The Evil Within 2* is like a concession to an archetypal videogame consumer: in case this generic member of the mass-market hasn't been paying attention, or isn't convinced that the game is scary enough, whenever entering a weird area or encountering a new monster, Sebastian will ask, out loud, "where the hell am I?" or "what the hell is that?" If good horror should make you feel uncertain, vulnerable and overwhelmed, this kind of naked declaration of intent and mood – *The Evil Within 2*'s generally sanded down design, and its clean storytelling – are antithetical. It's packaged and delivered better than the original, but its appeal to a broader, more basal audience conversely makes it less entertaining.

The Evil Within 2's combat, though, can be absolutely spectacular. For a modern third-person shooter, the body count is comparatively low; each enemy demands concentration, skill and sometimes a meticulous strategy in order to defeat. Something of a gimmick, those open-world sequences also let *The Evil Within 2*'s mechanics really sing. You spy a monster from afar, sneak up to him with your shotgun levelled, then blow off his head with a great, thundering crack and florid spray of blood. When the game parks its plot and closes its mouth, and leaves you to play at your own pace, the story benefits as well as the action.

Every hard-won battle becomes a tale of its own. Simply making your way from one side of town to another, because of how little ammunition there is around and how tough the enemies are, turns into a minor, heroic odyssey. As you collect items and upgrade your character, you slowly flip the game's momentum – picking up weapon parts and experience points isn't just a thrill in that reptilian, hoarder, watching-numbers-increase kind of way; it's a narrative journey as you painstakingly turn the tide of combat. What *The Evil Within 2*'s horror aesthetic lacks in originality and scares, it partly makes up for with gore and a genuine sense of ardour.

But, although *The Evil Within 2* is a cogent, unobjectionable, uneventful and usually mildly entertaining experience, it's worse than the original. In trying to make up for *The Evil Within*'s shortcomings, and capitalise on the successes of other games, Tango have stripped away this series' character. *The Evil Within 2* never toys with your mind, shocks you or makes you jump. Whether in regards to plot or visuals, it's relentlessly at-your-service, and that is the opposite of subversive or even memorable horror.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EVERYONE TALKS TOO MUCH: The game's visual abstractions and horror clichés would be more thrilling if they were just allowed to stand on their own. Not everything needs contextualising.

VERDICT 5/10
ENJOYABLE TO PLAY, BUT DERIVATIVE AND BADLY-WRITTEN



Left: *GT Sport*'s visuals are by far the finest the franchise has ever provided, which is unsurprising given that it's the first available on PS4. To get the most out of it you'll need a PS4 Pro and HDR-capable TV, though.



THE REAL RACING SIMULATOR

GT Sport

Without question, *GT Sport* achieves the desires of its creator. Polyphony Digital, guided by Kazunori Yamauchi, has delivered the eSports racer it has dedicated itself to. What's here is skilfully conceived and constructed, each individual element working in both isolation and in tandem with all others to focus its players on improving their ability behind the wheel.

Creations that achieve the goals of its creator are immune to criticisms relating to execution, but not necessarily to philosophy. In this regard, *GT Sport* poses some interesting questions as to whether franchises that have achieved incredible success are morally required to deliver on the needs and expectations of the mass audience they've built. *GT Sport* is loaded with quality, but it's not a *Gran Turismo* game. The Real Driving Simulator ideal has fallen to the wayside; the Real Racing Simulator has taken over.

This is a more straight-laced game, with car and track lists curated with technology over embellishment in mind. Gone are the cult classic vehicles, replaced with a concentration on elite racing cars taken from the worlds of Le Mans, touring cars and the most indulgent sectors of production sports and supercars. The option to bolt upgrades on to cars has been left on the garage floor, too, as have any kind of single player championship or career options.

Single-player consists of what are essentially a range of racing lessons and challenges designed to develop the kind of mindset required to generate success in online racing. These range from teaching you good etiquette on the track to practicing your skill at taking advantage of slipstream, pit stops and each track's ideal racing line.

Anyone with lofty aspirations needs a racing wheel to take full advantage of a handling model that has advanced significantly from *GT Sport*'s franchise siblings. *Gran Turismo*'s vehicles have forever felt as though they are floating above the track, with cornering and braking seemingly taking place despite a lack of contact with the tarmac, but cars here respond in a manner much more recognisable as 'real'.

That improved interaction between tyres and ground means greater delicacy is required to get the most out of the cars and stay in touch with the front of the pack, and for that the Dual Shock 4 is unsuitable. It's possible to set decent times with a pad, but not stunning ones, and in a game about elite competition, it feels like something close to blasphemy to not have a wheel and pedals.

Such a requirement acts as an apt reflection of *GT Sport* as a whole. If you're serious enough about digital racing to have invested in a racing wheel then this is a game for you. If you haven't considered buying one then you're going to be left cold. You decide if that's what you want from *Gran Turismo*.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Polyphony Digital
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (2-24 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN — F1 2017



WORSE THAN — PROJECT CARS 2

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CONSOLE COMPETITION: *GT Sport*'s extreme focus on online competition means it's without a genuine competitor on console. If you've been looking for something similar to *iRacing*, this is the game for you.

VERDICT 8/10

SKILFULLY EXECUTED, BUT IS IT GRAN TURISMO?

Below: Rally makes an appearance in *GT Sport*, although car and track options are few in number. The unique skills required to excel in rally makes it feel like you're playing a different game altogether, so put hours into practice before going online.





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FINDING BEAUTY IN BRUTALITY

Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

You've got to wonder whether somebody at MachineGames has spent a hell of a lot of time watching *Inglorious Basterds*, because *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* is essentially encapsulated by the same creed that Lt. Aldo Raine lives by: "Once we're in enemy territory, as a bushwackin' guerrilla army, we're gonna be doing one thang and one thang only – killing Nazis."

This mission statement is practically encoded into returning spectre of death B.J. Blazkowicz, not to mention his support team of loveable (and oh so terrifying) misfits. Only this time, the enemy territory is America. And the mission isn't just to kill a few Nazis on the road to completing a personal vendetta, but to take back the whole god-damned country from the Reich, just days away from fully integrating itself and its ways onto the American people. And there's something irresistible about the setup and execution too; *The New Colossus* has an overwhelming quality about it that makes it almost impossible to ignore or turn away from. It constantly commands you to revel in the ultraviolence, and you just can't help but oblige.



Above: *Wolfenstein II* looks gorgeous, particularly when running through an Xbox One X or PlayStation 4 Pro. Original Xbox One owners should expect to see a little slowdown here and there. Right: MachineGames has done another fantastic job breathing life and personality into a cast of characters that should be played for cheap laughs. Their arcs are crazily over-the-top, but also profoundly sincere at times. It really is something.

Perhaps that's because of two key points: the only good fascist is a very dead fascist, and that *Wolfenstein II* has some of the best weapon and mission design in the business. Do you see how these two elements might combine to create a lengthy single-player only, cinematic, story-driven campaign in which your goal is to find the most ridiculous weaponry that you can get your hands on and use it to eviscerate anybody even thinking of uttering the words "Sieg Heil?"

And when we say eviscerate, we mean it. The guns pack a mean punch here. Limbs are flying, bodies exploding, skin gets split and bones hacked apart. *Wolfenstein II* is a violent onslaught, and it takes great pleasure in revelling in that fact. More so than it did in *The New Order*, as while stealth is certainly an option – and recommended for helping to clear out some of the more strategically placed, alarm activating officers – your best option is almost always to grab two guns and start sprinting. In many ways, it actually feels as if MachineGames has learned a great deal from the 2016 *DOOM* reboot; the electric pace is stumbled across, pushing you to encircle enemies and push through tightly contained environments with surgical precision, it's something that works to great effect here – particularly once you start moving up the difficulty modes.

Dual wielding has been altered, now allowing you to mix and match weaponry between both hands, while each of the guns has been fine-tuned to allow for maximum damage. The shotgun is a notable delight, with three rotating barrels and an upgrade that sends its bullets ricocheting off walls and slicing through flesh. Combine this with some powerful sound design and some bloody-beautiful blood work – seriously, the walls just get *painted* as soon as a fire fight kicks off – and you're looking at a weapon system designed for maximum carnage. Upgrades for the weapons are scattered throughout the world, waiting to be found, while you'll find that you steadily increase in your core proficiencies the more that you engage with them. Movement speed, stealth prowess, the size of ammo clips and the distance in which you can slap a hatchet in an enemy's back all increase the further you push through the game and experiment with its various systems.

This works well for the most part, although *Wolfenstein II* is surprisingly poor at communicating some of its systems to the player. There's a significant lack of feedback when taking damage, meaning that you'll often only realise that you are being shot as you find yourself staring at the respawn screen – increasingly frustrating on harder difficulties when just a few hits can kill you, particularly in the opening salvo of missions where your baseline health count is limited to just 50. Infrequent check pointing is mitigated by an unexplained quick-save feature, while navigating the menus/UI can

IT CONSTANTLY COMMANDS YOU TO REVEL IN THE ULTRAVIOLENCE, AND YOU JUST CAN'T HELP BUT OBLIGE

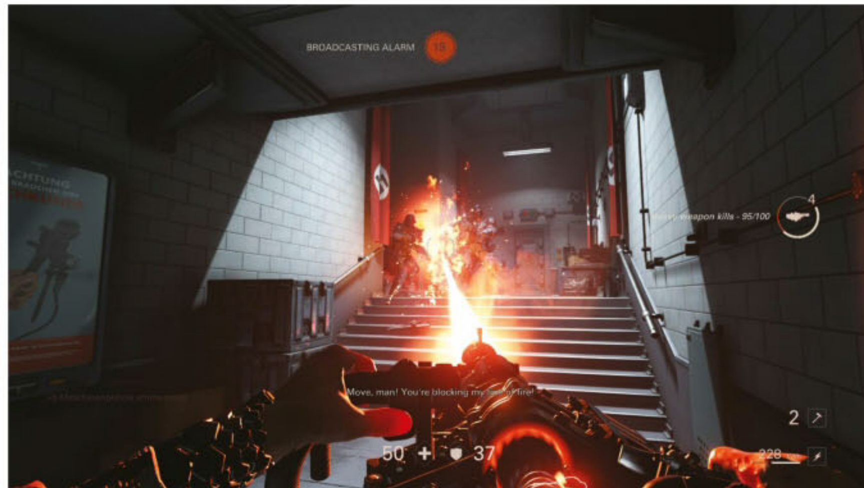
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
DEVELOPER: MachineGames
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



GAUGING REPLAYABILITY

With a single-player campaign that averages out around 14 hours, and with no multiplayer component to speak of, the question of replayability and value for money often surfaces. With a variety of difficulty modes left to drastically alter the pace of play, a steady stream of DLC lined up for release in the months still to come, and dual timelines (each offering an array of specific characters and weapons) there's plenty here to keep you entertained. Every one of the levels in *The New Colossus* is also packed with collectibles and reading material that help strengthen the world and its fiction. *Wolfenstein II* is a true delight to crawl back through. We would highly recommend it.

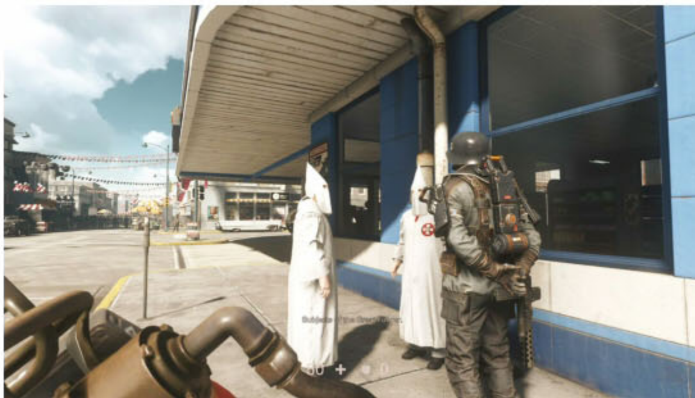


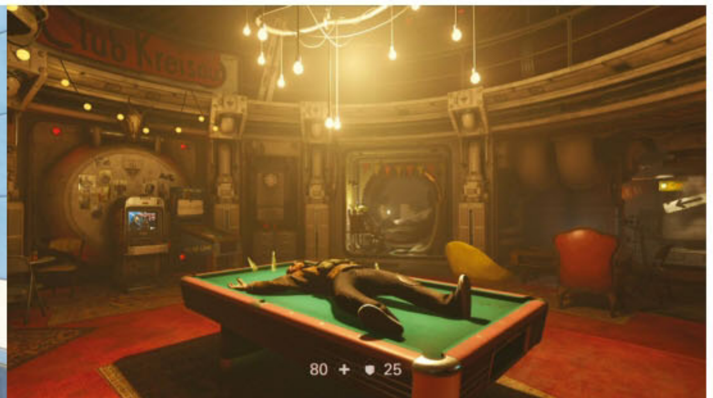
FAQs

Q. IS IT FUN?
Is it fun; are you being serious right now? *Wolfenstein II* is practically the most fun that you could possibly hope to have when surrounded by Nazis without going to jail.

Q. BUT IS IT VIOLENT?
Listen, we spent 14 hours blowing the limbs off of hundreds – if not thousands – of Nazi soldiers with twin-shotguns, revelling in a cascade of blood and guts. What do you think?

Q. IS IT RIDICULOUS?
Oh, don't worry. MachineGames has somehow found a way to ramp of the ridiculousness, making *The New Order*'s trip to the Moon seem like it was no big deal at all.





be a little cumbersome. It's so frustrating to see MachineGames struggle on the basics, creating minor (albeit constant) frustrations. These elements don't ruin the game – it's an otherwise slick and smooth FPS – but they will leave you scratching your head from time to time.

But – for the most part – you'll be having such a damned good time that you'll barely notice. MachineGames has, in *Wolfenstein II*, demonstrated that it is perhaps the most proficient FPS mission designer in the industry – seriously, somebody give these people a Half-Life. Almost every mission is excellently paced and wonderfully designed; insane and ridiculous, a pure delight to tear through.

The writing is also surprisingly thoughtful and sincere. Much like *The New Order*, *The New Colossus* manages to dedicate time to each of the cast, and you can't help but feel for each of them as the game pushes on.

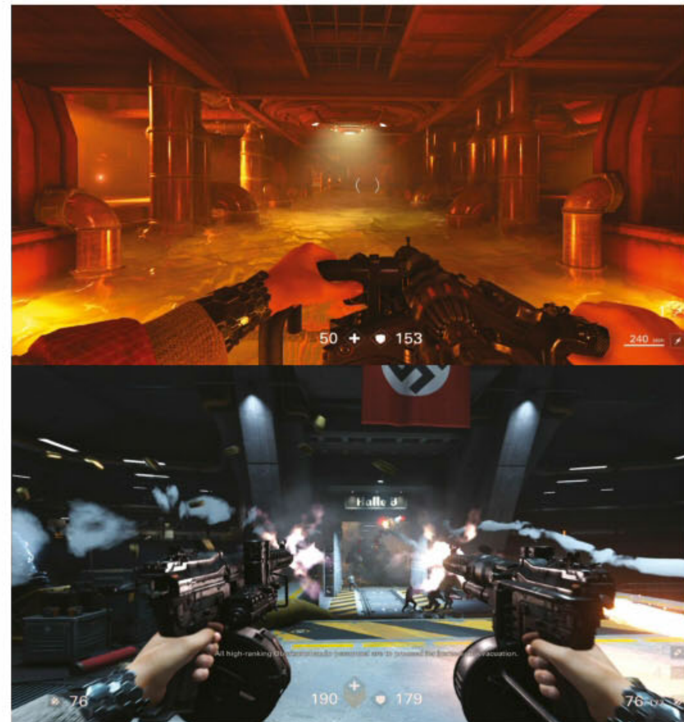
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STREAMLINED ACCESSIBILITY: With a somewhat messy user interface and a surprisingly minimal amount of customisation options, an increased array of accessibility options would have been welcome – we're getting old, we need larger subtitles.

It's incredible that a game so vehemently focused on the eradication and total destruction of Nazis can find the time to be quite reflective and thoughtful. MachineGames isn't afraid of having something to say. *Wolfenstein II* doesn't give a shit if you agree with its message or not. MachineGames has delivered a game that is self-assured and confident in *Wolfenstein II*. It's violent and unrelenting, a gorgeous and evocative shooter that captures the spirit of the earliest days of the FPS, while still finding room for growth in its story and characters. It's as fun to kill Nazis today as it was in 1992 back with the launch of *Wolfenstein 3D*, the only difference is that the guns we use to do the killing are a little bigger now, and the graphical fidelity has evolved to the point where we can see the grin plastered all over B.J. Blazkowicz's face.

VERDICT 8/10
A BOLD SHOOTER THAT NEVER FAILS TO ENTERTAIN







Above: Exploring South Park and conversing with its wacky denizens doesn't hold the same novelty value this time around, but there's increased interaction in the form of simple navigational puzzles that require your buddies' special powers in order to solve.

MAKES MARVEL THE BUTT OF THE JOKE

South Park: The Fractured But Whole

Games deriving from another medium don't usually make for astounding virtual experiences, nor do they offer much in the way of meaningful additions to their source material. Fortunately, like its predecessor, *South Park: The Fractured But Whole* is no meaningless cash-in. Instead, it's been carefully crafted by the show's creators to give it a credible authenticity that perfectly encapsulates the show's distinguished blend of social satire and deranged humour.

At the whim of kiddie kingpin Eric Cartman, the boys have hung up their fantasy robes, indulging instead in a game of superheroes that sees them don all manner of absurd and amusing personas. The superhero setting has been one of the strongest story arcs in the series to date, and effectively translates into an interactive experience that's as clever as it is cringeworthy.

Serious societal issues, such as racist cops and the exploitation of migrant workers, are skilfully satirised to the backdrop of the children's playtime antics – which, as always, include a troubling obsession with bodily functions. There's a plethora of throwbacks to the show that'll appeal to long-time fans, but it never relies on prior knowledge enough to alienate its less devoted audience.

The game's most impressive development comes courtesy of its combat. The nature of battle has been entirely revamped, resulting in more depth and choice when it comes to fending off everyone from the town's intolerant rednecks to its aberrant Crab People. Skirmishes are turn-based, with each character's individual superpowers offering a varying range and tactical advantage, whether it's inflicting close-range physical damage or casting troublesome status effects from afar. Time manipulation and the ability to strategically knock foes into obstacles add further layers to the game's elementary RPG mechanics.

The new grid-based battles are an intricate addition that force you to think ahead in order to have everyone positioned where they can strike effectively. Fail to consider the layout of your team, and you'll find your character out of range or blocked by other combatants. The robust cast and highly customisable player classes ensure the final battle remains as thrilling as the first. Add to that some dynamic and humorous boss encounters, and you've got a game that prevails over its predecessor in terms of gameplay, even if the jokes don't always feel quite as punchy as they did in the first.

While it's great to witness events in South Park unfurl over several times the length of an episode, there are some issues with repetition. Hearing the same one-liners eventually gets tiresome, and the rudimentary puzzle-solving gimmicks grow old a few hours in. Still, it's a joyous and faithful representation that does justice to the overtly offensive series, while simultaneously succeeding as an enjoyable and engaging gaming experience in its own right.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

GIRL POWER: Technically, you're the same kid from the first game, but you can make your character female now. Wendy's also jumped on the superhero bandwagon, with her alter-ego, er… Call Girl.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft San Francisco
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
FAMILY GUY: BACK TO THE MULTIVERSE



WORSE THAN
SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH

VERDICT 8/10
UNABASHEDLY MOCKS YOU, ITSELF AND EVERYTHING ELSE.



A TIDY EIGHT IS BETTER THAN A MESSY FOUR

Golf Story

We love stumbling across a hidden gem of a game that has snuck out without anyone really noticing. There's no doubt that *Golf Story* is such a gem – and one that's exceptionally hard to describe. It's a bit like Zelda, if Link carried a 9-Iron instead of the Master Sword. Yeah… see what we mean?

Golf Story takes the best parts from Nintendo's classic golf titles and throws in a charming story about a young golfer trying to go pro. As you progress, you'll unlock new clubs, challenges, and eventually courses. Each of these offers a selection of quests, earning you money and experience points to make your hero better at hitting little white balls into slightly larger holes.

The golf itself is simple, but *incredibly* satisfying. Guidelines will show you roughly where your ball will land, and you can fine-tune by hitting it short or adding spin. The classic three-tap power-bar manages your shots' power (and whether you slice it) so you know what happened when you get it wrong and a crocodile eats your ball – which happens more than you would think. The system is nuanced, but once you've mastered it you'll be knocking them in from all over the place. We ended up winning almost every course by at least a few strokes – we'd have liked a little more challenge as the game progressed. Maybe we're just really good at golf?

Backing up the solid golf game are the story missions and quests. At times the narrative can become a little laboured, but for the most part it potters along nicely. The variety of gameplay is to be praised – you'll be playing disc golf, piloting drones, and doing plenty of other bizarre but brilliant things as you progress through your career.

Add to this some excellent dialogue, sprites and one of the most pleasing uses of the HD Rumble yet, and you've got a great golf game that's well worth the 20 hours or so you'll sink into it.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: Sidebar Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £13.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





Above: The game doesn't take itself too seriously, which is just as well, because it asks you to do things like defrost frozen golfers with a ball hit out of a campfire.



VERDICT 8/10

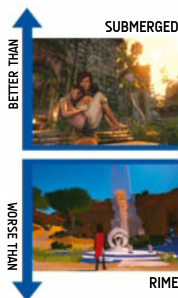
CLASSIC GOLFING WITH A FUN STORY, AND FEW FLAWS

CHILLING IN THE SKIES

AER: Memories Of Old

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Forgotten Key
DEVELOPER: Daedalic Entertainment
PRICE: £18
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Some games are just designed to make you smile, filling you with a warm, comforting feeling that can only come from delving into a virtual 'happy place'. That's exactly how you'll feel playing *AER: Memories Of Old*, where a world of floating islands, hidden temples and ghostly fragments takes you on an odyssey of dreamlike proportions.

Its low-poly aesthetic makes for a gorgeous realm to explore, which is rather apt considering exploration and environmental puzzle solving are the core ingredients of AER's recipe. With a focus on combat, you're free to navigate underground temples and solve puzzles with nothing but a lantern and a curious sense of wonder, while the handy power to transform into a bird and fly between islands reaffirms the freeform design of the overworld. NPCs will offer the occasional hint, but you're ultimately free to fly and jump wherever you please.

The flying mechanics are also smooth and simple to handle, the camera often pulling back so you can identify points of interest in a land full of waterfalls, ruins and enchanted groves. It's a more cerebral experience, one that evokes the likes of *Rime* and *Ico* (the latter clearly being a big influence on *AER*'s relaxed pace).

Without much combat on the menu, *AER* puts a lot of its on-foot focus on platforming, and it's here that the game begins to show a few cracks in its enchanting veneer. The floaty jump at your disposal can sometimes feel unpredictable, especially when navigating moving platforms or areas with high tiers that will leave you tumbling to the bottom again. It's far from a constant gripe, but it takes the edge off an otherwise empowering experience.

The soundtrack will help maintain that fuzzy feeling as it moves between soft waves of synth and brooding chants that rumble in underground sections, the melodies of your bird flight proving a particular favourite that makes taking to the skies an acrobatic exercise in stress relief. While criminally short in length (we bring our time in *AER* to a close in a few hours), it's a world you'll likely want to revisit when you're in the mood to de-stress.



Above: The use of light plays a role in navigation (highlighting new objectives through dark, labyrinthine passageways), puzzle solving (activating switches) and unearthing plot points that hint at an intriguing back story rather than drowning you in needless lore.



VERDICT 8/10

A CHARMING YET BRIEF LITTLE PLATFORMING GEM.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Canada, Romania
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: EA Vancouver, EA Romania
PRICE: £45.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

GOOD TOUCH FOR A SMALL CONSOLE

FIFA 18 Switch Edition

This is probably the best handheld version of FIFA we've ever played, and if that sounds a lot like we're damning with feint praise then you're correct. There's a great deal to admire about how *FIFA 18* has been compacted and squeezed into the relatively under-powered Nintendo hybrid console, but it ultimately means that it is not only lacking a little in some departments; it also carries with it some of the shortcomings of this year's iteration of the game.

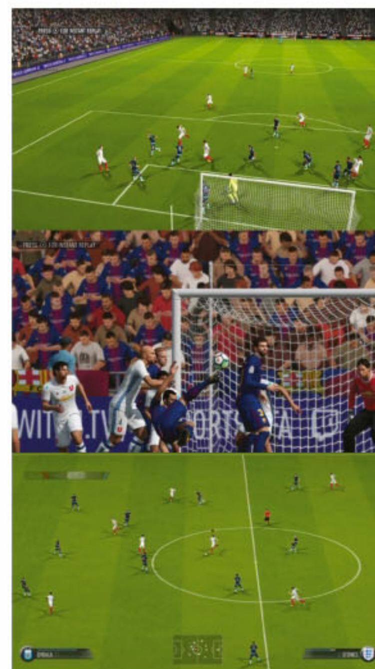
The key concern, as we've had with the Xbox One and PS4 versions, is a general sluggishness. Neutering pace as the ultimate weapon in FIFA is a good thing, but a general lack of responsiveness doesn't really do the experience justice. And then there's the relatively poor implementation of shot and passing power, which doesn't seem to improve much with either assists turned on or off.

But there remains much to admire. For a start, it's pretty incredible visually, with the graphics standing up nicely against early generation versions of *FIFA*. The moment-to-moment game experience, menus and game options are largely intact too, but there's no Journey mode. A bit of a shame, but given that it's pretty memory intensive with its cutscenes and story, its loss is understandable. More frustrating is that the Switch doesn't allow for online multiplayer with friends with any ease as there's no party or friend invite system. Local play on two machines is supported, however.

Online play generally is pretty good, and local play is excellent. We would suggest pro controllers are the ideal way to play, if only because the analogue sticks give you finer control than Joy-cons, but they're not bad for on-the-move play. And not having analogue triggers, while not ideal, doesn't hurt *FIFA 18* badly, since finesse in sprinting isn't necessarily that important. Overall it's a mixed bag, but far better than we might have expected.



VERDICT 7/10
A HIGH MID-TABLE FINISH



Above: The likenesses in this Switch version of the game are pretty good, but clearly not as animated or detailed as those on Xbox One and PS4. It's actually quite pleasing to see what details have survived.

CYBER-PUNISHING

Ruiner

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Reikon Games
PRICE: £16.74
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

There's a great deal to commend about Reikon's twin-stick shooter. The style, so reverential of classic cyberpunk, hits all the right notes, the world building is very solid, and creates an intriguing environment on which to build its narrative, and some of the mechanics of the game build in some interesting feedback loops. Where it falters is in what we would consider to be the basics of good design; the structural loop of challenges we're presented and the feel of the combat.

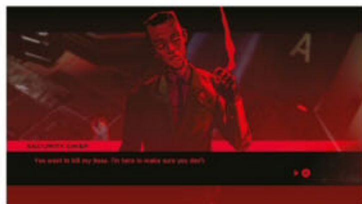
To call these things 'basics' might imply they are somehow easy, which they absolutely are not, but they are essential to get right if anything else in the game is going to be worth a damn. As twin-stick shooters go, *Ruiner* is just a little too sluggish in its action. Movement doesn't quite have the full 360-degree fluidity we would want, and while dashing keeps you dodging around at pace, it doesn't do enough to really drag the experience up.

The overall structure is also a bit of a letdown. Corridor after corridor gives way to a wider hall, enemies drop in waves, you dash around slashing and shooting, and then you get a grade for your troubles. Then more corridors and then another open hall for combat. The enemy types vary up a little, becoming faster, more agile, warping around you and so on, but the loop remains the same. And the bosses don't really offer enough variety to freshen things up.

That all said, the design of the world is fantastic, and it's actually a bit of a shame it's all confined to a fixed camera experience. As a taste of what this studio can do in terms of art and environment building, it's a great showcase, and some of the weapons and upgrades are pretty fun. Everything else just feels a little too familiar.



As each stage is complete, a Weapon Grinder appears that exchanges unused weapons for Karma credits to be spent on your own upgrades, plus a new weapon. It encourages you to kill quickly and efficiently for better bonuses.





VERDICT 6/10
COMPETENT, BUT NOT WHOLLY COMPELLING

LIFE...WHERE'S THE PAUSE BUTTON?

With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.

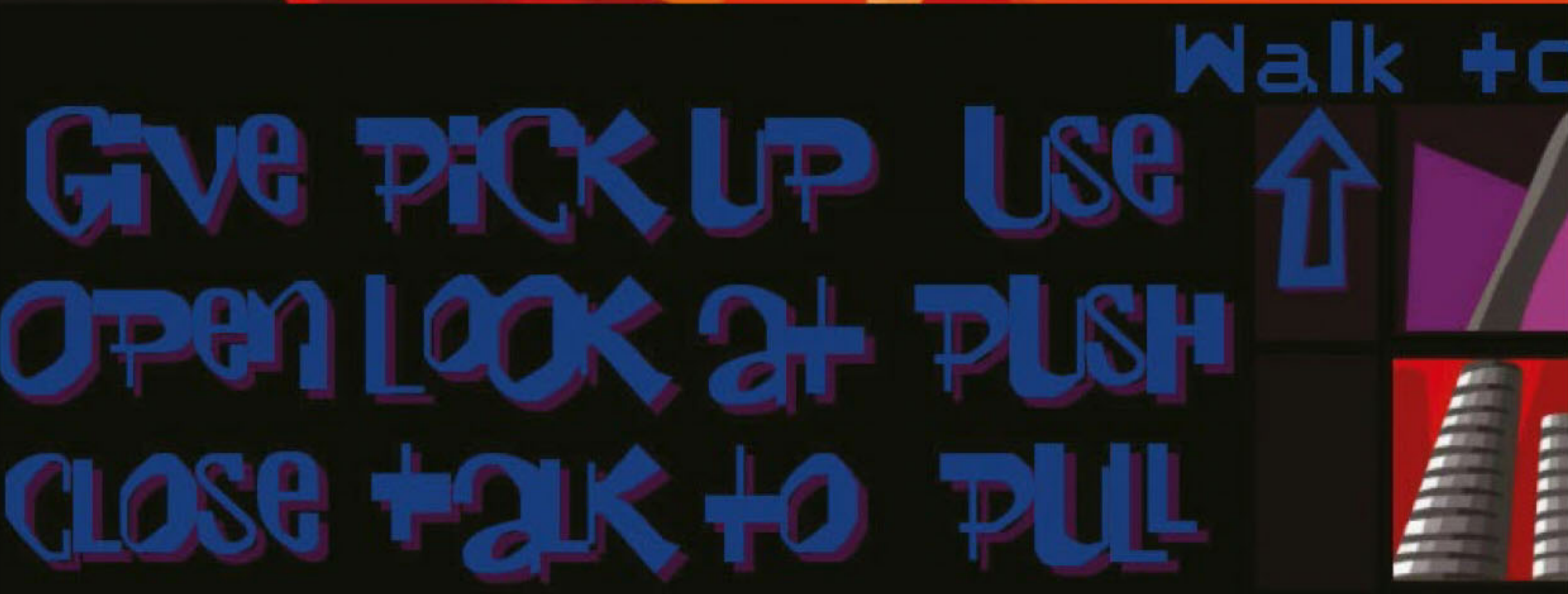




To find out more about Press Pause, visit;

pauseyourday.co.uk

> "I think that's one of the really nice things about games, that games can and do bring people together"
>
> **JODIE AZHAR, LEAD TECHNICAL ARTIST, CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**



WHY I ♥...

DAY OF THE TENTACLE

JODIE AZHAR, LEAD TECHNICAL ARTIST, CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

I love Day Of The Tentacle, *because it's really silly and it's one of the first games I ever played. I remember playing it with my mum and my older sister, and we sat around this PC and solved the problems and the puzzles together; I think that's one of the really nice things about games, that games can and do bring people together. It isn't just people sitting by themselves with a control pad – people do share their experiences. With a lot of games that isn't the same experience, but there are a lot of stories to be told in games, and* Day Of The Tentacle *definitely has a silly story, but it also created a story between my family and me.*












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RETRO

NO.194

90

RETRO GUIDE TO...

ATARI 2600

Having celebrated 40 years since its launch in the US, we take a look back at the incredible library of titles on one of the most successful games systems in history



BEHIND THE SCENES

96 **SPLINTER CELL**

It starred on the cover of **games**™ issue 1 back in 2002, but how was it originally made? We catch up with game director Francois Coulon to get the full story



INTERVIEW

102 **RON GILBERT**

We catch up with the *Thimbleweed Park* creator to reflect on his fantastic career and the longevity of adventure games



GAME-CHANGERS

106 **HALF-LIFE**

One of the most iconic first-person shooters of all time and a landmark release for developer Valve, games™ remembers an early pioneer for videogame's most popular genre

DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro and much more on our dedicated forum **forum.gamestm.co.uk**

THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

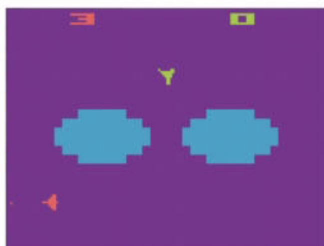
ATARI 2600



It's astonishing to think that Atari's first console is now 40 years old. To celebrate, we've revisited some of its greatest games. How many do you remember?

IN THE LATE Seventies Atari Inc was one of the biggest players in the games industry. The company, formed by Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney, was a huge player in the arcade industry and the success in that field meant that the company soon made inroads into the home-gaming market. That began in the form of the 2600, or the Atari VCS (Video Computer System), as it was then known. Fairchild had released the Video Entertainment System in 1976 and Atari was keen to make its own console, releasing the 2600 the following year. Despite having a significant head start and changing its console's name to the Fairchild Channel F, Fairchild simply couldn't compete with the amazing output of Atari's console. When it was finally discontinued in 1983 it had sold around 250,000 units. By comparison, the 2600 shifted over 30 million.

It wasn't all good news for Atari's console, though. Terrible games like *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* and an atrocious port of *Pac-Man* are said to have contributed to the big American crash in the early Eighties, while many of its developers were treated so poorly that they went on to form their own companies, including Activision, gaming's first third-party publisher. Despite the above, it remains Atari's most beloved home console, mainly because it has so many incredible games available for it, but also because it was many gamers' first experience into the exciting world of gaming. So, let's review some of the hits.



COMBAT 1977

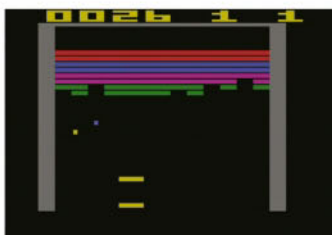
ATARI INC

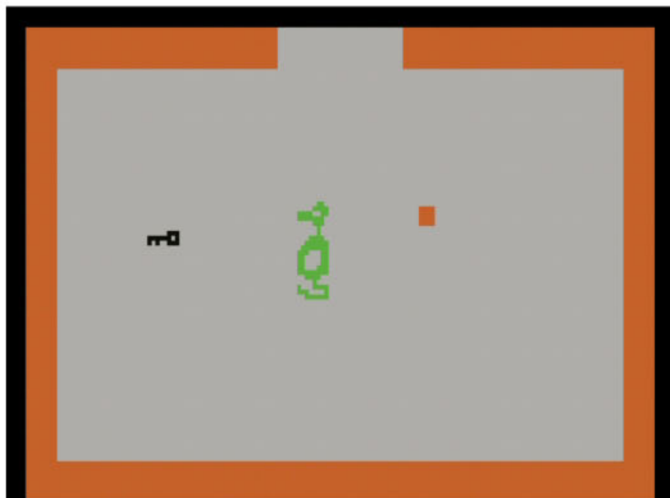
Combat originally launched with the Atari 2600, and it remains one of the best multiplayer experiences you can have on the console. Based on the old arcade games *Tank* and *Jet Fighter*, *Combat* lets you play as a tank, biplane or jet and requires you to face off against an opponent in a battle to the death. The tank levels feature the most strategy, as they take place in arenas with cover to hide behind, but the sheer amount of different gameplay modes available – 27 in total – means there are always different scenarios to discover, including the excellent Tank *Pong* and the ability to face off against a huge flying bomber.

SUPER BREAKOUT 1978

ATARI INC

Although Atari released the original *Breakout* on its 2600, this superior sequel is a far better game, and a solid arcade conversion to boot. In addition to featuring the original *Breakout*, this Super incarnation also includes several other modes. Double Breakout predictably adds a second ball and paddle to fool around with, Cavity Breakout adds additional balls that are trapped in the wall and come into play once freed, while Progressive Breakout features two sets of walls that slowly move towards the player. While it lacks the power-ups that would go on to define later games in the genre such as Taito's *Arkanoid*, clearing those walls becomes strangely hypnotic, particularly in Progressive Mode, which offers a surprising amount of replay value. There's also a Children's mode on offer, which makes the game a little easier than normal.

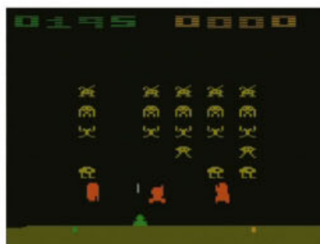


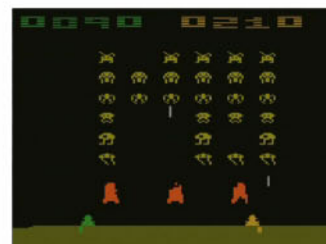


ADVENTURE 1979

ATARI INC

While Warren Robinett designed *Adventure* to be a graphical version of *Colossal Cave Adventure*, it ended up becoming so much more. While its graphics are primitive, the ability to traverse a huge playing area whilst avoiding monsters (which are always moving around the playing area) and solving puzzles left a lasting impact that affected action adventure game design for years.





SPACE INVADERS 1980

ATARI INC

This is arguably gaming's first true 'killer app', a game that every Atari 2600 owner wanted in their collection. While the actual graphics were a little ropey in places, the sheer amount of gameplay variations was astonishing with 112 different game modes on offer, including invisible invaders and stages with constantly moving shields.





ASTEROIDS 1980

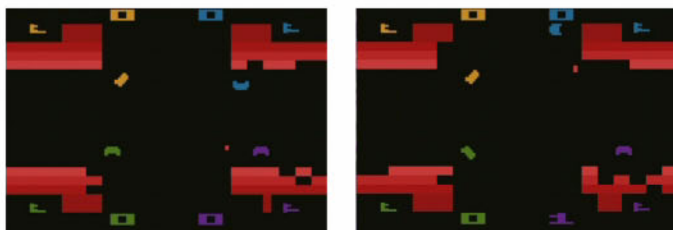
ATARI INC

Brad Stewart's *Asteroids* port is an excellent arcade conversion that still plays well today. While the Atari 2600 obviously can't replicate the button layout or vector graphics of the original game, all the intense rock blasting of the original is intact and it's highly challenging as a result. Like *Space Invaders* it's packed with additional game modes, too, with 66 interesting variations available.

WARLORDS 1980

ATARI INC

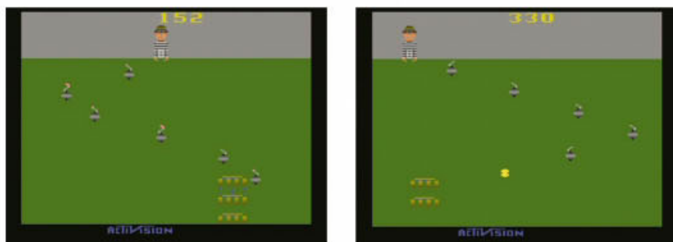
Warlords is quite possibly the best multiplayer game available on Atari's console. Based on the classic arcade game of the same name, it's essentially *Pong* crossed with *Breakout*, and sees up to four players defending their castles until they're the only person left standing. Designed to use the Atari 2600's paddles, it's an ugly looking game, but one that becomes virtually impossible to put down once you start playing. Alongside *Sensible Soccer* and *Bomberman* it's a regular attraction at many classic retro events, due to its timeless appeal and competitive gameplay.



KABOOM! 1981

ACTIVISION

One of Activision's first games on the 2600 remains an absolute joy to play. The game makes use of the paddle controller, and is exceedingly simple in its execution. A mad bomber, recently escaped from prison, patrols the top part of the screen and drops bombs towards you in increasingly trickier and faster patterns. You must use the three available buckets of water to catch them and stop them from exploding. It's basic sure, but it captures the fast-paced action-based nature of classic arcade games that Activision had set out to emulate.

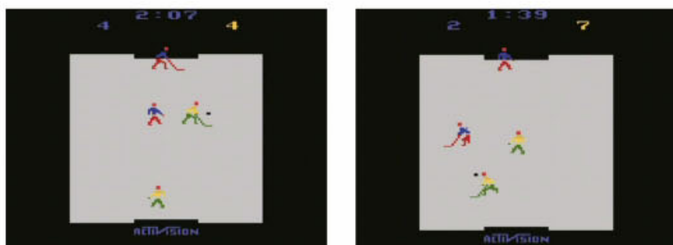


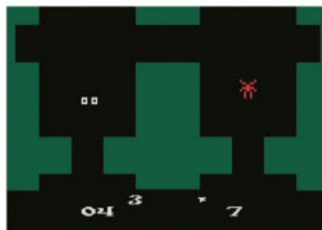
IT'S BASIC SURE, BUT IT CAPTURES THE FAST-PACED ACTION-BASED NATURE OF CLASSIC ARCADE GAMES

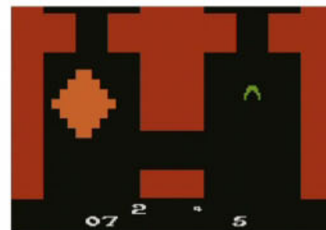
ICE HOCKEY 1981

ACTIVISION

There are a large number of sports games on the 2600 covering a variety of different activities, but none of them capture their subject matter as well as *Ice Hockey*. While it only offers two-on-two games, there's a staggering amount of depth available, with your player able to fire off shots from a surprising number of different angles. The action is fast and furious and, while the computer AI puts up a decent challenge, it's when a second player joins that fray that the game truly begins to shine.







HAUNTED HOUSE 1981

ATARI INC

This intriguing exploration game is considered by many to be one of the first examples of the survival horror genre. Depicted as a pair of blinking eyes, the player must navigate a haunted house in search of three pieces of a broken urn. Cleverly, items (and house layouts on later stages) can only be seen when the player lights a match, and they only stay lit for a small amount of time. Your light can also be extinguished if a monster enters the room, leading to tense nail-biting encounters.



PITFALL! 1982

ACTIVISION

Activision was formed because David Crane, Larry Kaplan, Bob Whitehead and Alan Miller wanted Atari Inc to treat them in the same way that record labels treated musicians. Their demands were royalties and their names on their games; demands that Atari's CEO, Ray Kassar, refused. It would prove a costly mistake, as the quartet went on to make some of the console's best games, taking a large wedge of money from Atari in the process. After a few moderate hits, David Crane's *Pitfall!* proved to be a phenomenal success, selling over 4 million cartridges and laying the blueprints for the side-scrolling platformer. It introduces the intrepid explorer, Pitfall Harry, who swings across chasms, jumps over crocodiles and leaps across rolling logs in a bid to retrieve as much treasure as physically possible.

STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK 1982

PARKER BROTHERS



The toy manufacturer Parker Brothers released a number of Star Wars games for the 2600, but its first remains its best. Based on the second hit movie and arriving two years after its cinematic release, the delay made no difference to the game's popularity, which sold like gangbusters. Sharing many elements with *Defender*, your lone Snowspeeder patrols the icy wastes of Hoth looking for gigantic AT-ATs to take down. The metallic beasts are well-shielded though, meaning some tricky shooting is required in order to achieve those required kills.



RIVER RAID 1982

ACTIVISION

Carol Shaw only worked in videogames for a short time, first working for Atari Inc and then moving to Activision, where she made just two games before leaving the industry. One of those games was *River Raid*, and it's a hell of a legacy to leave behind, being one of the best shooters on the system.

It's a fantastic blaster that has you trying to get as far as possible along the River of No Return by flying over drums that will keep your fuel topped up. You can shoot the drums for points though, delivering an excellent risk vs reward mechanic that adds a surprising amount of strategy to proceedings. A sequel followed in 1988.





DEMON ATTACK 1982

IMAGIC

Imagic was another early third-party publisher that began life after disgruntled Atari workers left the company. One of its best games is *Demon Attack*, which is apparently based on Namco's earlier arcade blaster *Galaxian*, but has a lot more in common with *Phoenix*, particularly the Intellivision version, which recreates the iconic boss stage from that game.

Demon Attack plays very much like *Space Invaders* and countless other single-screen blasters where you must defend yourself against waves of incoming aliens that will occasionally split into two and try and bombard your cannon. It's a great game that's made better by a large number of different gameplay modes, including a special co-operative version of the game.



MAKING PITFALL!

David Crane revisits his classic Activision game

Where does Pitfall Harry get his name from?

The name Harry meant nothing other than the fact that it rolled off the tongue nicely. He wasn't officially named Harry during development, it was just his nickname and it stuck.

How did you go about creating *Pitfall!*'s animation?

The hardware limitations of the Atari 2600 dictated everything. Every frame of Harry's animation had to fit in an eight-pixel-wide by 16-half-pixel-tall space. If it got tricky, I could change the colour of each row of pixels, but no two pixels in the same row could be different colours. The ROM was very limited, and each animation required many animation frames. So if Harry had to run, jump, climb and swing, he could take up a significant portion of the available ROM. But none of those problems were the worst. After creating a smoothly animated human figure for the first time in a videogame, I had to then make a compelling game. The main character used up a significant portion of the Atari 2600's display capability, so the question I had to answer was 'How do I make a game with what is left?'

Was *Donkey Kong* influencial?

I was single and living in a large apartment complex that had a small arcade in the recreation building. I played the arcade games and pinball machines many hours every week. I was well into the design of *Pitfall!* when *Donkey Kong* arrived, and as with any new addition to the arcade I played it to the exclusion of all else until I had it mastered. I didn't draw any parallels to *Pitfall!* at the time. As I have said, I considered it inevitable that human characters would end up in games, and arcade games had the computing power to do it. I already had paths and ladders in *Pitfall!*'s design, so that seemed natural to me as well. The Atari 2600 limited me to horizontal bands of gameplay, and forced me to go screen-to-screen. So to put it simply, I enjoyed *Donkey Kong* for the game it was, but at the time comparing the two games was like comparing apples to oranges.

What did you think of *Pitfall!*'s success?

Pitfall! earned Activision some $50 million… Not bad for a game that cost maybe $50,000 to make. But to be fair there were a lot of marketing dollars spent there. When a game becomes a hit, companies spend on marketing to make it a mega-hit. While it is a mega-hit, marketing dollars are spent to keep it a mega-hit. One mega-hit can propel a company to stardom and help the business in every way.

Tell us about *Pitfall!*'s merchandising…

Whole teams of people were merchandising *Pitfall!*. We had a board game, jigsaw puzzles and other licensed products. The merchandising people made a deal with Ruby-Spears to produce a Saturday morning cartoon. They made a few episodes, and those aired as part of the Supercade with the *Pac-Man* cartoon and others. To be brutally honest, the stories were pretty bad, and the production quality low compared to what we see today. But I would still love to have prints of the original masters for my personal collection.



CREATING FROSTBITE

Steve Cartwright revisits his slick action game



Where did *Frostbite's* ideas originate?
I think the idea for *Frostbite* came from playing *Frogger*, *Frostbite* came out at the same time as *Q*bert*, so people naturally thought that's where the idea came from due to the nature of jumping and turning the colour of the landing spot. But I never saw *Q*bert* until *Frostbite* was finished.

Why choose a polar setting?
Since we were limited to 8-bit graphics – it was mostly about 'what do I think I can make in just eight bits'. I think the original idea was about jumping on rocks across a lava flow, but the blue and white colours worked so much better on the Atari 2600.

What was it like coding on the Atari 2600?
The difficulties of working on the Atari 2600 are well documented. There were always memory issues and screen-timing issues. *Megamania* was still the toughest project technically, because of the nature of the display, but *Frostbite* turned out to be difficult because of the overall game logic and rules – something that is extremely easy with higher programming languages, but presented real problems when writing code in 6502.

What clever tricks did you use in the game?
One of the tricks I employed that made *Frostbite* play so well was the fact that as the game increased in speed, the controls increased in sensitivity. This was groundbreaking in the field that is now known as UX. It made the player feel as if they were getting better and more skilled right along with the increasing challenge.

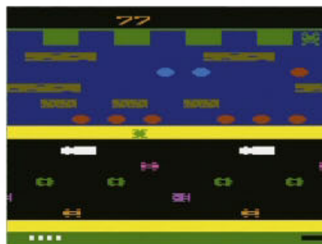
How much playtesting went into the game?
Frostbite was one of the most tested games we ever did. The speed of the game increased to the point where objects moved and wrapped around the screen so fast that they appeared at times to be moving backwards – kind of like those old Westerns where the wagon wheels appear to be turning slowly in the opposite direction. Amazingly, if you unfocused your eyes, fell into a 'zone' and played by instinct alone, top players could actually play the game at a pace that was far beyond the ability to visually process what was happening.

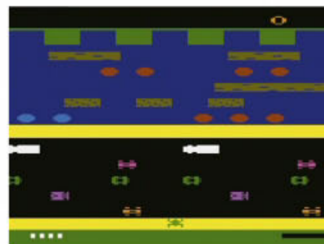


FROGGER 1982

PARKER BROTHERS

Many consider this to be one of the best arcade ports on Atari's console and it's hard to disagree. It's an authentic replication of the Konami coin-op, with sensational looking visuals and gameplay that actually manages to improve on the arcade original by adding a number of unique gameplay modes. If you change the difficulty setting logs will no longer kill Frogger if he floats off the screen, and he'll instead appear on the opposite side. There's also a Speedy version of *Frogger*, which significantly ramps up both the speed and the difficulty of the game, and is great for high-score chasing. A weak sequel, *Frogger II: Threeedeep!*, arrived in 1984.



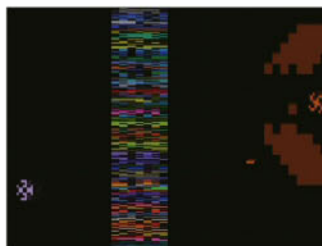


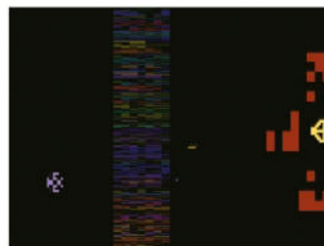
YARS' REVENGE 1982

ATARI INC

Howard Scott Warshaw is well known in the Atari community. He's not only responsible for creating one of the first games licensed from a movie in the form of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, but is also infamous for creating *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, a game so bad, unsold copies were buried in a New Mexico landfill along with numerous other Atari games. Fortunately, Howard also made the rather delectable *Yars' Revenge*, a thinking man's shooter, which feels as fresh today as it did on its original 1982 release.

Taking control of the titular Yar, you must shoot away at a forcefield and then use a guided missile to destroy your opponent, whilst avoiding the routine attacks it throws at you. A barrier is found in the middle that protects you against all but the most deadly of assaults, but it also means you can't shoot back. A very clever, very hectic blaster.





INFAMOUS FOR CREATING E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL, A GAME SO BAD, UNSOLD COPIES WERE BURIED IN A LANDFILL

MS. PAC-MAN 1982

ATARI INC



Although it's the best-selling game on the system with over 7.7 million cartridges sold, Atari's conversion of *Pac-Man* isn't very good, so we're going to skip over it. Instead, we'd urge you to seek out the more modest-selling sequel, as it's a far-superior game with better looking visuals, tighter controls and good representations of the arcade game's mazes. Its additional modes are pretty weak, effectively limiting the number of ghosts that chase you, but this still holds up exceptionally well.



FROSTBITE 1983

ACTIVISION

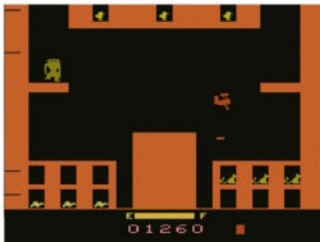
This fast-paced action game from Steve Cartwright is superb. The idea of the game is to help Frostbite Bailey build an igloo by jumping across to different ice floes in order to collect new blocks of ice. It's easier said than done, though, as a large number of animals surround the floes and will kill Bailey if he comes into contact with them. Even returning to dry land isn't always an option, as a polar bear starts patrolling the area from level four onwards. And did we mention you only have 45 seconds to complete each stage?

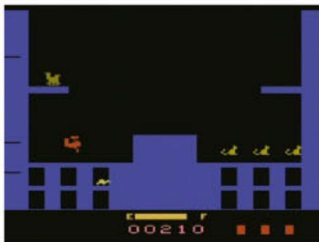
ENDURO 1983

ACTIVISION

Larry Miller's *Enduro* is easily the best racing game on Atari's console. As its name suggests, *Enduro* is all about endurance, in this case the aim is to pass a set number of vehicles before you reach the next day's dawn. While the AI gets aggressively tougher as the days continue, it's all the great effects, like switching from day to night and having to drive through snow and fog, which really help separate *Enduro* from other racers on the system.







SKY SKIPPER 1983

PARKER BROTHERS

A number of Nintendo arcade games were ported to the Atari's console, including *Mario Bros.* and *Donkey Kong*. This remains our favourite though, being an accurate port of the obscure original. Taking control of a small plane, you must bomb the nearby gorilla so that you can rescue trapped animals. It's a neat concept requiring deft flying and nerves of steel, especially on the later stages where your hairy foe recovers at an alarmingly fast rate.

KEYSTONE KAPERS 1983

ACTIVISION

Garry Kitchen's frantic cops-and-robbers game is another slick effort from Activision that has you chasing a robber through a department store and stopping him from reaching the roof. The playing area is several screens wide and split across several floors, meaning you'll need to ride the available escalators and dodge the items thrown at you. It's pretty tough, but there's a useful map at the bottom of the screen that always displays the whereabouts of your adversary. Each level is played against a strict time limit, meaning you'll really have to keep your wits about you if you have any hope of completing the later levels.





PITFALL II: LOST CAVERNS 1984

ACTIVISION

Activision's sequel was a huge deal at the time, massively improving on David Crane's original. The levels are far larger this time around, and many of them are vertical as well as horizontal. Harry is now able to swim and he's also unable to lose lives, instead being sent back to a checkpoint if he comes into contact with an enemy or hazard.



H.E.R.O. 1984

ACTIVISION

This inventive offering from John Van Ryzin has you exploring mines in search of trapped miners. Your helicopter-like contraption is fitted with a laser and a limited supply of dynamite, which can be used to defend yourself against nearby beasties or to destroy certain walls. The later mine shafts become extremely hazardous, filling with magma and water, while the layouts become even more tricky and puzzle-like to navigate. And if that wasn't enough you also have a continuously depleting power bar to worry about.

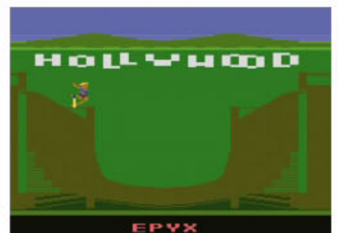
SOLARIS 1987

ATARI INC

Douglas Neubauer's port of *Solaris* was released 11 years into the 2600's lifespan. As a result it pushes the machine to absolute breaking point with some of the most impressive hi-res visuals to be seen on the system. The game itself is a frenetic shooter that sees you tearing around a huge universe in an attempt to save the planet Solaris. While the game revels in shooting as many enemies as possible, it's also possible to rescue pilots and negotiate dangerous corridors at intense speeds. An insanely ambitious shooter and a benchmark for the system.







CALIFORNIA GAMES 1987

EPYX

It's astonishing to think Atari's console was still getting great games a decade after it was released. *California Games* is one such example and, while it only features four events: surfing, half-pipe-, footbag and BMX Racing, they're extremely varied and playable by up to eight people. It's graphically incredible too, and is easily one of the best-looking games on the system. Epyx also released *Summer* and *Winter Games*.



BEHIND THE SCENES

SPLINTER CELL

In 2002 Splinter Cell was not only redefining stealth action, it was also leading the launch of games™ as our issue one cover game. We explore how sticking to the shadows put Ubisoft into the spotlight



Released: 2002
Format: Xbox, PC, GameCube, PS2
Publisher: Ubisoft
Key Staff: Francois Coulon (Director), Nathan Wolff (Lead designer), Martin Caya (Lead character artist), Antoine Dodens (Lead programmer), Fabien Noel (Sound designer)



Sam Fisher got a starring role on the cover of games™ #1 along with an 8/10 review.

WHEN IT COMES TO CONSIDERING THE INCREASINGLY VAST HISTORY OF CLASSIC TITLES IN THE GAMES INDUSTRY, IT CAN BE HARD TO FIND SOME SORT OF CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE AS TO WHICH AND WHY CERTAIN GAMES HAVE ENTERED INTO THE ETHEREAL HALL OF FAME WHILE OTHERS WERE LEFT NIPPING AT THE HEELS OF THOSE GREATS THAT STOOD BEFORE THEM. For the earlier games of the Eighties it's a little easier to understand: these are often games that 'did it first' or, if nothing else, at least did it better than anyone else. The Nineties still offer a little more leeway for evidence, with developers finding their feet in the 16-bit era, but truly discovering innovation with the invention of genuine 3D gaming. It's in the early 2000s where things start to get a little bit tougher; on paper. As a relevant example, it would be tough to point to *Splinter Cell* as a surefire, multi-million selling game. Ubisoft certainly believed it would be, but it was hard to say that a shooter based on the more subdued brand of military from Tom Clancy would have found much success, and even with the release of *Metal Gear Solid*, stealth still seemed less marketable than action equivalents. But *Splinter Cell* was never meant to be 'just' a stealth game. In fact, it started life as something else completely.

"I was working at Ubisoft as a project lead, as the creative director for a project," says Francois Coulon, the man who would become the key creative vision behind *Splinter Cell*. "The game was supposed to be a revolutionary title," he explains, "that was a blend between two types of gameplay. You would have a strategy core layer where you would see something from above – a map like Warcraft II – and then you could go into any unit and play them in third-person or first-person view."

> I WAS GOING TO TAKE THE TOM CLANCY LICENCE AND I WAS GOING TO MAKE A VERY MASS-MARKET CONSOLE GAME WITH THE LICENCE



The addition of a visibility meter was important for the player to know when they were safe and when they were likely to be spotted.

Despite the inventiveness of it the game was ultimately scrapped, the hardware at the time simply unable to meet the demands of such a concept. However, the original universe – a "shattered world" with a series of islands based on key capital cities – was kept, and it was here with this licence where Coulon would continue his work.

"At some point something happened at Ubisoft Paris," recalls Coulon, "called Ubi Free. It was a virtual union that had been set up by three people, I believe, and they sent an email to everybody at Ubisoft to say that the Guillemot brothers were dictators, that the work conditions were very bad, and so on. It was pretty weird to be honest, because that was not the case." Despite that it still caused some pressure for Ubisoft Paris, driving the Guillemot brothers to "sort of overreact". Gerard Guillemot, in particular, saw it as a bigger problem, and decided to take action. "He said, 'Okay, there is nothing we can do in this country, we cannot run a creative company here, so I'm leaving France and I'm going to New York and I'm going to bring some creative people with me over there.'"

Coulon and a number of creatives from Ubisoft Paris left to form a New York office, with the shattered world IP following along as part of the divorce settlement. "We went to New York and we went there to try and create this shooter, which was – at that time – the first shooter that Ubisoft had been doing." Up until that point Ubisoft had primarily been known as the *Rayman* developer. The popular PS1 platformer had given the company some recognition for making games rather than publishing, but it arrived at a time when the age of the 2D platformer was coming to an end. The company already needed something to stand out in a totally different and not so cutesy way. "It's not that they were against violence," adds Coulon, "but no violent game had been released by Ubisoft so far."

While work on the shooter had already begun, and the shattered world universe allowed for some interesting sci-fi elements, there was one particular gaming example that



Full-on combat was an option, too, but a challenge to achieve and not nearly as satisfying.

had sparked inspiration within Coulon for what form – particularly in terms of how it should be presented – Ubisoft's first shooter should take. "I remember showing the Guillemot brothers the first *Metal Gear Solid* and saying, 'Look, this is the game that we should be doing'. *MGS* was only using one engine and they were doing the cinematics of the game in the engine. It was totally seamless between the videos and the gameplay: it is mise-en-scene, and that's where we should have been going." That was the direction that Coulon wanted to take, but not initially for its stealth gameplay but instead the way it was a "mix between a movie and a game," something that – with the new offices in New York – Coulon and his team would start prototyping for a similar sort of cinematic experience.

What that ultimately meant was a long gestation period. For almost two years the team were prototyping gameplay elements within this shattered world universe, leveraging the concept to create new and interesting ways of playing games. Unbeknownst to them, however, the shooter was being held back while Ubisoft looked for a suitable IP to attach it to. The company was keen on developing the idea but averse to risking a new, original franchise on new platforms like the Xbox and the PS2. And so prototyping continued, all the while these interesting gameplay systems were being taken and implemented into other games that were being developed by Ubisoft.

In fact, during this period the New York studio was downsized due to costs, and many of the team members were then sent to Ubisoft Montreal. The creator of this shattered world would leave at this point, taking the concept with him and in fact producing an animated series called Skyland (with no relation to the toys-to-life series). With nothing but a generic shooter left and no licence to attach it to, it was about time something came along. "Then one day I heard that Ubisoft had bought Red Storm Entertainment,"



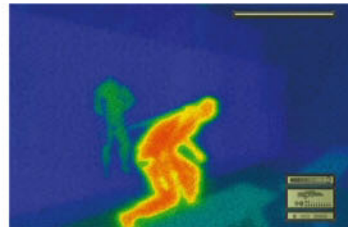
As Coulon had intended, *Splinter Cell* managed to reach key points throughout the story just by having the player take part in them without the use of cutscenes.


Something *Splinter Cell* did well was empower players to make them feel like covert secret agents, and gadgets like the snake camera were pivotal in doing just that.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

THE INNOVATIVE MECHANICS THAT SAM FISHER BROUGHT TO GAMING

HEAT-VISION GOGGLES



While night vision wasn't a totally new concept, *Splinter Cell*'s combined use of infrared and heat signature detection enhanced a feeling of covert action while empowering players with information. It became just as iconic for the series – in part due to the familiar activation sound pinging in your head right now – as many of the other recognisable traits.

DYNAMIC LIGHTING



While technology like dynamic lighting wasn't invented by *Splinter Cell* – it was mostly a reward of using the Unreal Engine – it was still a relatively new feature set for developers around the time and the first time a stealth game implemented AI that was affected by it. The function made the game feel more 'real' and made absolute sense for any stealth game since to implement.

SPLIT JUMP



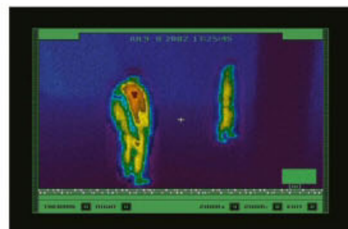
The split jump ability ended up becoming so iconic to Sam Fisher that it was impossible for any other game to copy this concept wholesale. It must've inspired others to be more inventive with their movesets, however, especially considering the multiple ways that the split jump could be used.

INTERROGATION



While this also wasn't exactly brand new, the way that Ubisoft utilised it provided a multitude of gameplay benefits that hadn't really been done before. Gathering information was an obvious one, but gaining access to locked areas, using hostages as a body shield or disabling enemies without murder all helped Fisher feel like the super agent he was.

DEPLOYABLE CAMERAS

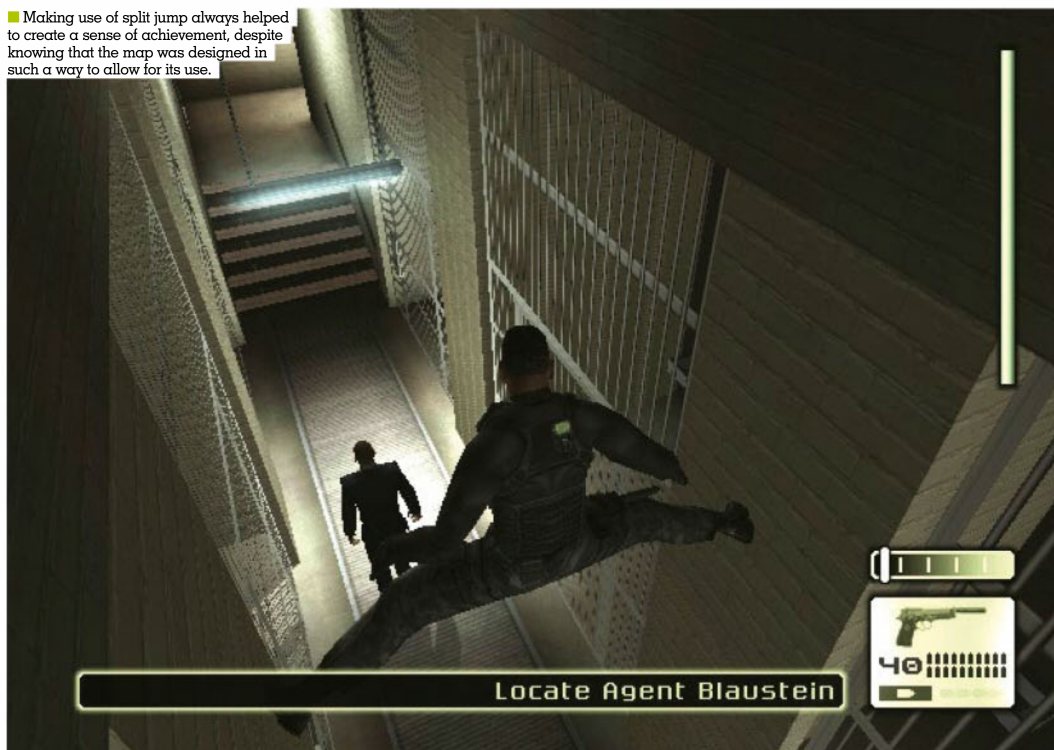


With an array of techy, sci-fi gadgets at his disposal, Fisher really did fit the mould of an in-his-prime Jason Bourne. Players could approach situations in any number of ways, so recon was important. This is where the numerous cameras came into play, the snake camera feeling particularly rewarding when discovering an ambush behind a door.

GREATER AGILITY



The athleticism of Fisher enabled a number of new ways to explore the environment. It's hard to know if rappelling was a totally new concept at this point, but certainly the freedom of this range of agile movement around a map allowed players to devise their own plan of action through a stage – one of the central pillars of *Splinter Cell*'s gameplay.



Making use of split jump always helped to create a sense of achievement, despite knowing that the map was designed in such a way to allow for its use.

says Coulon, "which was a studio created by Tom Clancy and that had done the first of the Rainbow Six series." This was finally the opportunity that the game that Coulon had been working on for so long needed.

"I said to them that Tom Clancy is super mass market in terms of his books, selling millions literally and movies with Sean Connery, Harrison Ford and this kind of stuff. Very reputable actors, all with the licence of Tom Clancy." Coulon adds that there was little knowledge of the name in videogames besides Rainbow Six, which itself was a 'hardcore' experience and not very mainstream at all. "I decided I was going to take the Tom Clancy licence and I was going to make a very mass-market console game with the third-party licence," says Coulon.

Next came a need to figure out what it was with the Tom Clancy licence that the team could actually leverage for its shooter. "I called the head of legal, I asked what the rights that we bought were and what could we use. We couldn't use a lot of things, because actually Tom Clancy is divorced and so we couldn't use certain licences due to his ex-wife." Without a licence, then, it was up to the team to devise something that could be used, and as a result they ended up setting a precedent for the name Tom Clancy and videogames: while they wouldn't utilise existing Clancy products, they could still produce something that *felt* like Clancy. "And so we read all the books, saw the movies – which we had seen already anyway – and we tried to define Tom Clancy: it was a thriller, that was the word, he's some kind of insider, he has some kind of gadgets and he's very geo-political – it's always set in a different country, and so on. And so we said, 'Okay, let's do this; it's like James Bond without the humour.' And that's how it all started."

IF YOU PUT THE PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT YOU'RE DOING THEN YOU'RE EMPOWERING THEM TO BE CREATIVE

It was actually here, and not with the *Metal Gear Solid* inspiration, where the game switched to incorporate a much more stealthy form of gameplay. "We did the first prototype, and we thought about the stealth thing from the beginning. We changed the gameplay from being a shooter to, let's say, a smarter shooter. The inspirations were basically *Metal Gear Solid*, but also *Thief* and a bit of *Deus Ex* also, for the freedom of the character and the way that you could do many, many things."

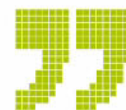
These were essentially the central aspects of this prototype and the game that would come to be known as *Splinter Cell*: an emphasis on stealth, the ability to extinguish lighting and to control the shadows, and the liberty to tackle a stage or situation however you wanted. It goes without saying that the prototype blew Ubisoft management away and the game was greenlit immediately, throwing the team into production and giving Coulon the opportunity to expand his team considerably. Better still, he was to get a producer, freeing him up to remain in charge of the creative direction of the game itself.

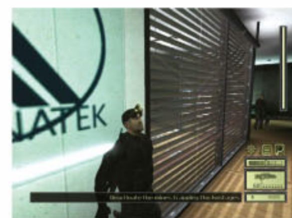
"The original team [before moving into production] was actually five people from New York who were absolute beginners that we had hired fresh out of university. Those people came to Montreal, they followed me to do this game." They included Nathan Wolff, lead designer, whose

WHAT THEY SAID…

Every aspect of the game is a true work of innovation, from its astonishing audio/visual impact to its wonderfully realised gameplay and level design. It all works in perfect harmony to provide an entertaining stealth-action experience that leaps miles beyond the competition.

Official Xbox Magazine, 2002







> A GAMING EVOLUTION Splinter Cell > Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory > Splinter Cell: Conviction



Now widely considered to be the best of the series – and in some circles the best stealth game ever – *Chaos Theory* improved upon absolutely every aspect of the game.



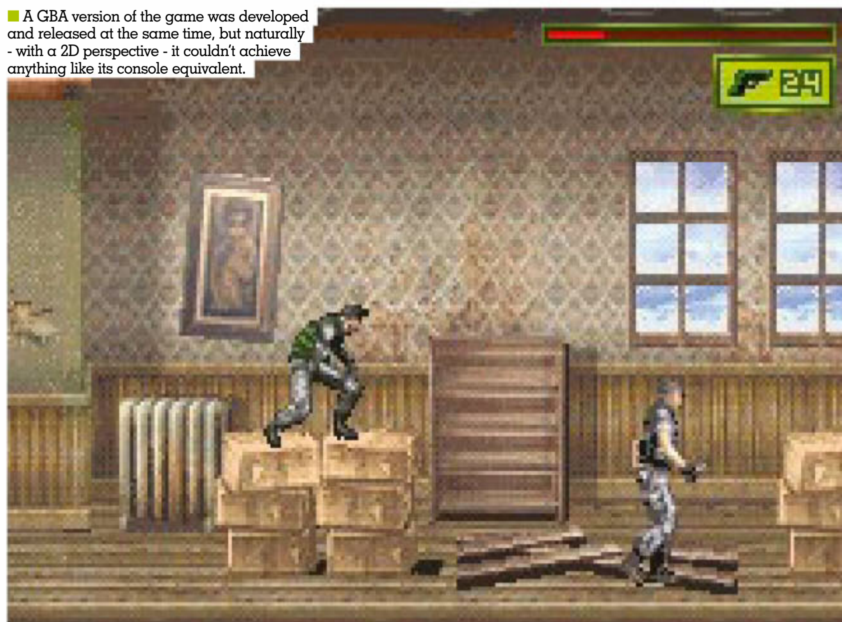
Things sadly declined from there and, with waning sales, *Conviction* prompted an even bigger push towards more action-based gameplay, even with ill-advised flashback sequences set in Iraq.



gameography begins and ends with *Splinter Cell* since he departed the industry after its completion. Then there was Ed Byrne, who designed many of *Splinter Cell*'s intricate levels, David Kelina who worked on its AI, and then JT Petty, who was the scriptwriter for the first two games. "For all of those people this was their first game ever," adds Coulon.

It may well have been a blessing in disguise, however. Videogame development had now reached a point at which it had settled into a groove, and while the team sizes have escalated over the last few years, the processes were mostly set in stone by the turn of the millennium. As such, the idea of hiring complete newcomers to become leads of a brand new IP is something many would have balked at. Coulon never said so while speaking to him, but there's a sense that the small five-person team prototyping ideas for two years before production even began had lead to a number of innovative and clever twists on standard shooter gameplay that had never been seen before. Facets of *Splinter Cell*, such as the remote cameras and the split jump, the heat vision goggles and the means to read how hidden Fisher was were just some of the more well-known additions to the game that helped it to stand out.

Splinter Cell felt fresh in so many different ways, but its numerous gameplay mechanics – and how they could all be utilised to play the game in the way that *you* wanted to – was undoubtedly the thing that made it stand head and shoulders above its competition. Even better was how one feature's inclusion would then end up inspiring another team member to use that tool in a new or intriguing way, a particularly memorable example being the ability to use the heat vision goggles to track the buttons pressed on a keypad. "That was smart, I admit," Coulon laughs. "That came from the coders, that's why I think it's smart." He goes on to explain that his method as a creative director was to inspire idea sharing, not to belligerently enforce the kind of game that he wanted. "As a creative director, the way I work – and I've done the same all throughout my career – is that I am not the kind of guy who knows exactly the game that he wants and is going to impose it on everyone. I don't know the game I want, so I have more dialogue with everybody. Which means my role is to make sure that everybody understands the creative vision of the game, what we're going for, what are the main pillars of the gameplay, and just to have everyone come up with cool ideas."

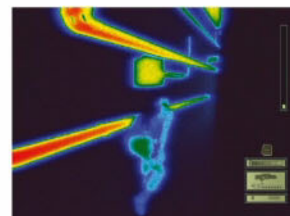


A GBA version of the game was developed and released at the same time, but naturally - with a 2D perspective - it couldn't achieve anything like its console equivalent.

WE HAD BEEN ADVISED TO CHANGE THE STORY, IT WASN'T CLEAR WHAT WOULD HAPPEN SO IT WAS A BIT TOUCHY

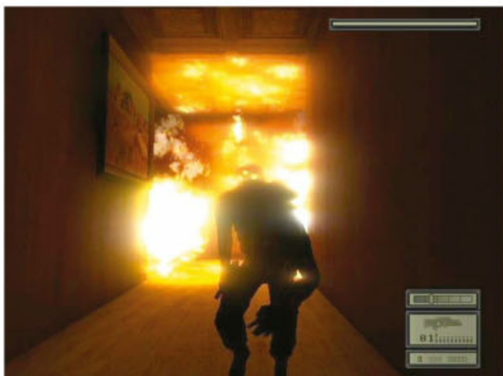
This method, as it happens, is why *Splinter Cell* is so rife with cool tech and fun gadgets to play around with, tools for the player to make use of. "So a coder came up with this heat-sensing light treatment, which was pretty innovative at the time. And then someone suggested some goggles at some point, and then somebody else said, 'What if we could use the thermal goggles for the keypad?' So it was a communal idea. If you put the people in the right understanding of what you're doing then you're empowering them to be creative. And many of these ideas came about like that. I have no way to tell you that this one came from me, this one came from this guy. They all come from many people."

Yet while it's clear to see how two years of pre-production could lead to so many interesting new features that ultimately became iconic to the Splinter Cell franchise, one thing that wasn't quite so clear was how Sam Fisher, a man who was meant to be a forgettable



Heat sensor goggles had a number of uses, all distinct from one another. They were a great example of how just one excellent addition can provide a myriad of gameplay opportunities.





sleeper agent, ended up becoming such a well-loved character. So we had to ask, how did Coulon help shape this aspect of the game too? "I was not involved," he admits, "because I am a French guy. I can't allow myself to judge American names or voices, I left this to the American people. The first script that we had in New York we did with a French scriptwriter; this was before JT Petty, and when we were doing the story at the very beginning the name of the character was Mr Cayden. We thought it was cool, except that everybody laughed at us. They told us that he sounded like a dumb guy or whatever, so for titles and for names I left all that for native people."

However, Coulon's interest in geo-politics was a natural help, even assisting scriptwriter JT Petty in crafting a globe-trotting experience that would match Clancy's novels. "I was not involved in the name Sam Fisher," he explains, "but only in deciding who he was. JT Petty was not super familiar with geo-political plots, so I told him how I wanted it to be in terms of the geo-political story."

The story itself felt darker, covert and so much more tantalising than any other shooter of the time. It was hard not to get a sense of the brooding Jason Bourne from the grizzled voice of veteran super soldier Sam Fisher. The game's original name of Third Echelon, in fact, was born from the news of the early 2000s that the United States, under a secret government code name of ECHELON, had enabled powers to intercept and monitor a wide range of telecommunications – something that outraged many citizens. This is where the fictional Third Echelon was born, the name of Fisher's secret government operations employer. It all added to a sense of intrigue and concern around the covert actions of nations on a global scale.

"We wanted it to be Clancy," highlights Coulon about the story itself, "and you know, in the end America wins... well, it's not that simple, it's much more subtle in general.



They say great character design is about the silhouette and, while it might be unconventional, few modern game characters have one as iconic as Fisher's body-carrying hunch.

LET LOOSE

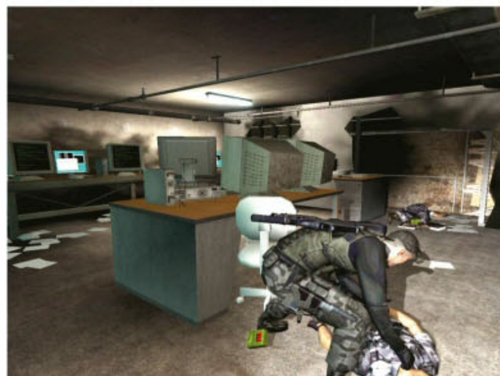
Coulon on the real challenge of making a stealth game

"THE BIGGEST PROBLEM is that you're not supposed to trigger the alarm, which means you have to do whatever you can to kill the guard before he rings the alarm. This is cool, but what happens if you trigger an alarm? It's super frustrating if you trigger an alarm and 'Boom! Game over'. I could've killed the guy, if people come in I could've fought, I could've hidden. The balance is stopping at the first mistake, which can be very frustrating, or letting the player play out the consequences which can also be hassle because, what, 25 soldiers are going to come, you're going to kill them all and the map is going to be empty? There's a right balance between those two things and, in my opinion, this is the tricky thing for stealth games."



But the interesting thing about the story is that the game started in '99 and of course it began development in 2001. If you remember *Splinter Cell* starts with an oil problem in Georgia, except initially – when we first did it – it was Azerbaijan. Because of 9/11, and because Azerbaijan was a Muslim country, we didn't want to portray this. We had been advised to change, it wasn't clear what would happen from this event and what would go on with the world, so it was a bit touchy." This only helped the game tap into a particular global mood of the time. As such, while Ubisoft made further efforts to capitalise on what was already a promising package – the marketing surrounding the iconic three-light goggles or the exclusive elements with Xbox, for example – it becomes so much easier to see why the original *Splinter Cell* became such a smash hit, going on to sell over 6 million copies and coming in at the number three best-selling game on Xbox, right after *Halo* and *Halo 2*.

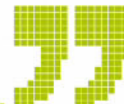
Coulon explains how it felt at the time, as it might have for any developer of big name games: "So when you say you have Tom Clancy, the gameplay is very real, from a technical standpoint it works perfectly, the story is cool and you have a great voice actor – it should work. Of course it's going to be a success, you believe in it, but many things can make you doubt." Coulon pauses for just a second: "Somehow it worked out."



WHAT THEY SAID...

This is the kind of game I imagined when I used to dream about the experiences next generation consoles were going to give us. Splinter Cell is one of the smartest games I've ever played in that it challenged me to lose myself in this world of espionage.

IGN, 2002





RON GILBERT ON MODERN ADVENTURE GAMES

"I see games like *Firewatch* and *Gone Home* as an extension of our work [at LucasArts]. Adventure games are obviously very narrative focused – I don't even think you can have an adventure game without the narrative; then it would just be a bunch of random puzzles. Narrative gives the puzzles meaning. They are really good at establishing this sense of place. I think *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island* were very good at that too."



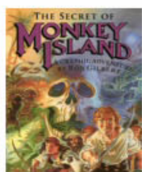
INTERVIEW
RON GILBERT

One of the pioneers of the point-and-click adventure, Ron Gilbert helped establish one of gaming's most beloved genres. Here he reflects on his career and what the future holds following retro-inspired Thimbleweed Park

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Maniac Mansion [1987]
Director and writer



The Secret Of Monkey Island [1990]
Director and writer



Putt-Putt Joins the Parade [1992]
Director and writer

WHAT WAS THE working environment like at LucasArts back in 1987?

We were a relatively small group at the time, and we just shared ideas among the entire little group of people that we had at LucasArts. Absorbing other people's ideas into your own game was just something that just naturally happened; somebody would shout something out at lunch and it would be like, 'Oh, that's really good', and it would get put into the game. There was no ego involved – in terms of who came up with the idea and whether it would go in or not.

How small of a group are we talking here?

Maniac Mansion was just three people; it was like David [Fox] and Gary [Winnick] and I, we did everything on that game. Well, I guess we had one tester, but he was only on the game for the last three months. *Monkey Island* had seven people on it, but even that was a much, much smaller group of people than we had with *Thimbleweed Park*.

What do you gain from working in such small and agile teams?

If I look back at *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island*, it was very easy for us to just add stuff to the game. If one of us made a joke it would be in the game that afternoon, just because we could. But if you're working with a team of a hundred people [in the triple-A space] there is *so much* process, right? If somebody says, 'Hey, I have a funny joke', well it has to go through three assistant producers and then a producer and then to this other person and then the programming team has to do estimates… it just kills all that spontaneity.

I look at games like *Monkey Island* and then I look at *Thimbleweed Park* and there is almost this improv to their design. It is so easy for us to just add stuff that we just do it. 'Oh wow, that's funny', and then that is in the game. I think that helps with the humour when you can work like that.

> **THE ONE CONSTRAINT WE HAVE IN THE WORLD IS MONEY, IT'S THE ONE THING THAT REINS US IN FROM BEING COMPLETELY RIDICULOUS**

What was it like building the engine for *Thimbleweed Park* compared to that of SCUMM back in the eighties?

It has been a long time since I built the SCUMM engine, but I've been programming non-stop since then. So it's not like I stopped programming and then I'm trying to pick it back up; I've been programming non-stop. So jumping back into building a new engine is… well, it's mostly a hell of a lot easier. Because we have really nice tools now and really nice debuggers now, and we've got all of these wonderful things. I have, for all intents and purposes, infinite memory [and] I have an infinite number of discs. There are all of these problems… I mean, we spent so much time on [the] SCUMM system dealing

with the fact that we had very little memory, and now it is just not even something that I have to worry about.

The limitations of the SCUMM engine must have kept creativity in check though, right? Now you have all of this extra space, memory and development time, but what do you do with it?

Well, *that* is the challenge! The challenge is that we have infinite memory; the challenge is that we have infinite space. We can quite literally do anything that we think of. Sometimes you kind of have to pull yourself back and go, okay, well that's kind of neat but that's a lot of work. We can do it, there is no technical reason we couldn't do it, but is it neat enough to justify the expense? Money is always an issue. Money was an issue back on *Monkey Island* and budget [was] an issue here on *Thimbleweed Park* too. I think the one constraint we have in the world is money and the budget, it's the one thing that reins us in from being completely ridiculous.

Do you stand by your decision to base your games around the use of Verbs rather than Icons to give instructions?

I never really liked Icons. I *never* liked them. I know that Icons have an advantage when you are localising – clearly – but I just struggle too much with them. I'm going, 'What *is* that? Oh that's a hand grabbing a rod, but what does… what does that mean exactly?' I just find "open" [as a command] to be a lot clearer.

I really think the interface is a big part of the charm of those LucasArts games – which is why we decided to stick with it for *Thimbleweed Park*. If I were ever to do another point-and-click game after this I would certainly do all 8-bit graphics, because, from an aesthetic standpoint, it's just *beautiful*. But I might re-think the interface; I never really liked the COIN interface that *The Curse Of Monkey Island* and *Full Throttle* used, I really didn't like that. And I really don't like that 'Single Click, Use' where everything is Use, Use, Use – I don't really like that either. I don't know what a new interface is or could be, but I would quite like to play with what a better interface would be with this stuff. That's probably what I would do if I did another adventure game.

Do you think your approach to non-linear storytelling has changed at all in the last 20 years?

I don't think it really has, no, I don't think it really has. If you look at *Maniac Mansion* and *Monkey Island*, all those things we built… they are basically single stories. They have one basic ending. I mean, *Maniac Mansion* had five different ways that you could accomplish the end, but it was still the same ending every time. That's one of the things that has remained consistent. If I were to make another point-and-click game after [*Thimbleweed Park*] I would really try to play with the narrative design, where the players really could just take it in different directions – so that it becomes this spider web. I really want to look at doing some innovative things.

Do you feel like adventure games are your future then? Or do you have any desire to move onto other game genres or projects?

I like working on all sorts of different games. I think RPGs are the type of games that I enjoy playing the most. I'd love to work on a real, *proper* RPG – I think that would be a lot of fun. But I also love point-and-click games; I love storytelling and I like the way point-and-click games do storytelling. I mean, if *Thimbleweed* does well, I would just love to go off and do another one.

> **I THINK MY PARTICIPATION IN THAT GAME WAS MORE OF A MARKETING MOVE THAN IT WAS ACTUALLY IMPACTING ITS DEVELOPMENT**

Can you still play your old games for fun, or does it bring back nightmare memories from development?

There were no horrors or nightmares, but no, I don't play them for fun. I enjoy watching other people play them. I enjoy watching people play them because I like to try and get inside their head and go, okay, what are they trying to figure out now? Okay, so they got that clue, but *ohhh* they missed that clue – so that I find enjoyable, but not playing them, no.

These adventure games were always so fun to figure out. Does it not frustrate you that so many potential players will instead just watch it on Twitch or YouTube?

I can certainly see that if you're building a short narrative game that YouTube or Twitch streams might be frustrating, because somebody could sit down and then in four hours they have experienced your entire game. I think that is especially true of games where there really is no experience other than watching the cut scenes that make up the game, that can be particularly hard. But I think for a game like *Thimbleweed Park*, I mean, the game is gigantic!

I'm sure somebody will stream the whole game, but it isn't the sort of game

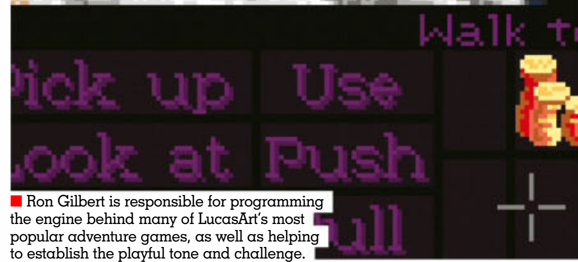


■ The *Secret Of Monkey Island* is a modern classic, mixing witty humour and intuitive puzzle designs into a smooth pirate-themed adventure.









■ Ron Gilbert is responsible for programming the engine behind many of LucasArt's most popular adventure games, as well as helping to establish the playful tone and challenge.









RON GILBERT ON PUZZLE AND GAME DESIGN

"Gamers have matured. We now have a gaming audience that is millions upon millions of people bigger than we had back then, and they think about things a little differently. If we look at modern players, they still want challenge, they still love to be challenged and wrestle a problem and such, but what they don't want to be is confused and frustrated… We are better about signposting stuff now, about making it clear where you are in the world and what type of things you are likely to find."

where you can sit down for a few hours and see the whole thing. I also think that playing *Thimbleweed Park* is very different to watching *Thimbleweed Park* being played, because of all of the choices you get to make and all of the dialogue; anybody that streams this, they are going to get these five dialogue choices and they are going to pick one and you are going to go, 'No, I want to hear the other thing'. That's the kind of thing that will make you want to go and buy *Thimbleweed Park* after you watch it.

Do you have a favourite Monkey Island game?

This is what I often say about *The Secret Of Monkey Island* and *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge*. *Monkey Island 2* is a better game, but *Monkey Island 1* is a better *designed* game; those two games are special to me for different reasons.

How did you find the experience of working with Telltale?

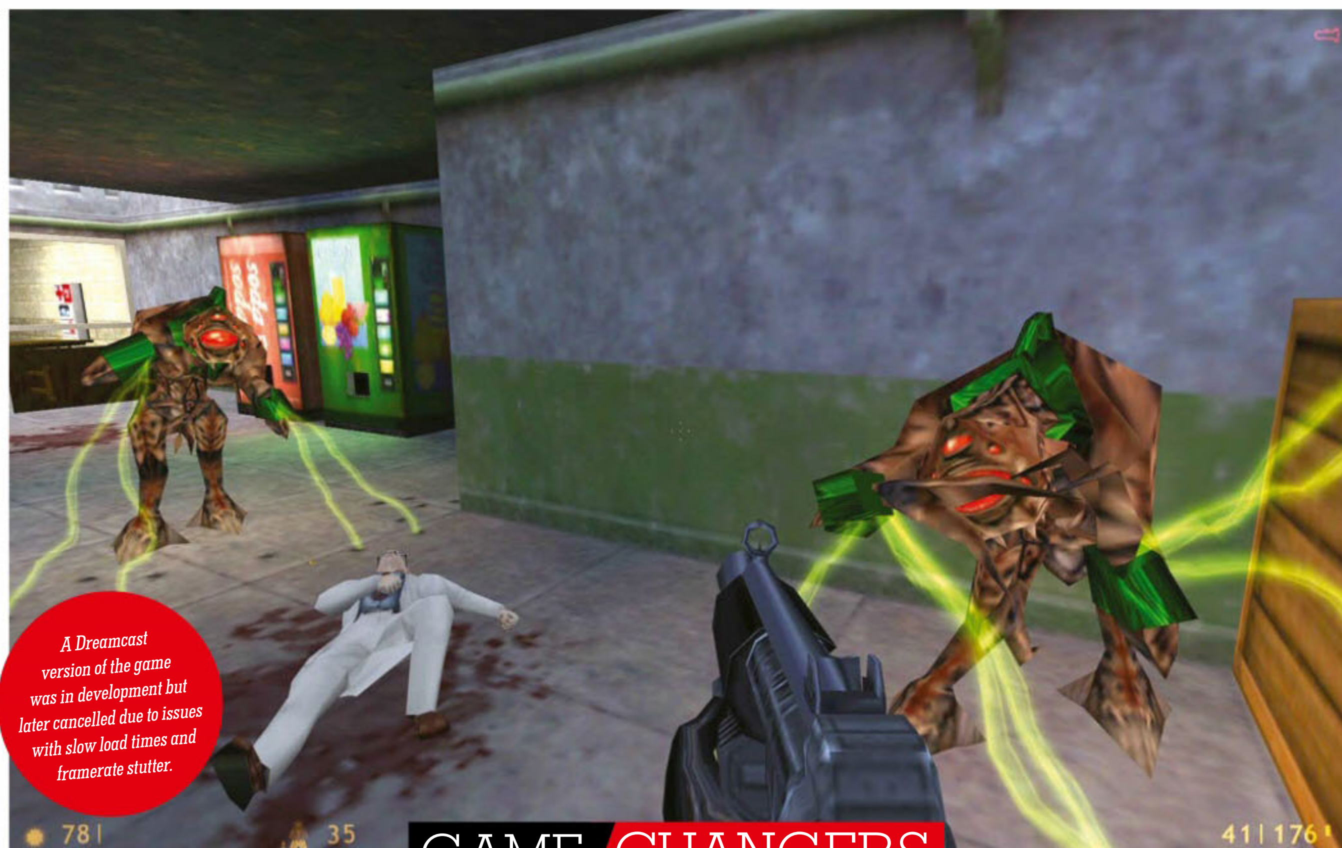
That was for a very brief time. I was only there for like an afternoon… The first episode was already in the can, so, you know, I think my participation in that game was more of a marketing move than it was actually impacting its development.

What have you been able to do in *Thimbleweed Park* that just wasn't possible in the *Maniac Mansion* era?

It's probably just the sheer depth of everything, because we did have limited resources; we didn't have the memory, we didn't have the disc space. Things like drinking the tea and using the eye drops in-game, it's all animated, we wouldn't have had the resources to do things like that then, whereas now it is virtually trivial for us to go through and do this kind of stuff. Now we are able to make a game that, while it may not be deeper, it appears to be deeper; the layers of details have really been layered up on everything.

Do you feel like *Thimbleweed Park* could inspire a new generation of adventure game makers?

Yeah, maybe. That's really hard to know. People are inspired when they fall in love with something. If there is a new generation that fall in love with *Thimbleweed Park*… our hope with *Thimbleweed Park* is that there are people who have never played a point-and-click adventure game before that play *Thimbleweed Park*. To me, that's the more interesting audience. The hardcore point-and-click people are going to love this game – I have no doubt that they are going to love this game – but for me the bigger challenge is to take people who have only played *Firewatch*, who loved the narrative, and to tell them 'Hey, you know what, this is actually a really good game and you're really going to like this as well'. To me, that's the bigger challenge in all of this.



A Dreamcast version of the game was in development but later cancelled due to issues with slow load times and framerate stutter.

GAME CHANGERS

HALF-LIFE

Developer: Valve Corporation **Publisher:** Sierra-Online **Released:** 1998 **System:** PC

One of the most iconic first-person shooters of all time and a landmark release for developer Valve, **games**™ remembers an early pioneer for videogame's most popular genre

HALF-LIFE WASN'T the first game cast from a first-person perspective to tell a story, but it certainly changed the way in which developers would approach and execute narrative design in the confines of a 16:9 headspace. A landmark 1998 release, *Half-Life* is, undoubtedly, one of the strongest and most critically acclaimed debuts for a studio ever; a revolutionary work from Valve Corporation whose influence is still felt today, almost two decades on from its original release.

Beloved by millions for its immersive game experience, interactive environments and naturalistic pacing, *Half-Life* puts as much emphasis on puzzle solving and storytelling as it does its gunplay. And to think, all of this achieved with a crowbar-wielding silent protagonist, built inside of a heavily modified Quake engine, by developers who weren't certain that what they were trying to create would ever come together, let alone be accepted by the masses. *Half-Life* should never have worked, though perhaps that's part of what made it so special to begin with.

VALVE SAW VALUE IN THE VIDEOGAME EXPERIENCE, AND IT UNDERSTOOD THAT THE MEDIUM COULD DELIVER IN A SIMILAR WAY TO FILM AND NOVELS

With development led by former Microsoft employees Mike Harrington and Gabe Newell, the road to *Half-Life*'s creation was paved with overcoming tremendous obstacles.

Newell and Harrington had no experience developing 3D action games, they only knew that they loved playing them and could see the potential and room for expansion in the genre. *Doom* and *Quake*

ICONIC ELEMENTS

GORDON FREEMAN MAY BE SILENT, BUT THESE THREE SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS



THE CROWBAR

★ Immersive sims have a history of making pedestrian items iconic touchstones, and *Half-Life* is much the same. The crowbar became synonymous with the brand, a weapon that proved to be useful in any and all situations.



G-MAN

★ Who was he? It was difficult to know for certain, but *Half-Life*'s well-dressed, ever-ominous villain would prove to be a defining character for the series. You barely got any face time with him, but you just *knew* G-Man had the answers you were after.



HEADCRABS

★ The most iconic enemies in the Half-Life series, the headcrabs, might be small in stature but they certainly know how to ramp up tension in just about any scene they may appear in. Terrifying and menacing, they are the perfect enemy and looming threat.

were big inspirations, with *Half-Life* born out of a desire to innovate in the space, as something of a reaction to the way in which the videogame industry had begun to trivialise the FPS experience. If Valve was going to do *Half-Life* it was going to do it right: the game wouldn't be another shooting gallery set across a series of claustrophobic corridors but a way of exploring new worlds and characters, of harnessing the components and design techniques that made the fledgling industry so unique and exciting. Valve saw value in the videogame experience, and it understood that the medium could deliver in a similar way to film and novels.

Most publishers did not. It was a risky endeavour from the outset, using considered thought as a driving force rather than mindless violence for entertainment's sake. Much of *Half-Life*'s development was bank-rolled by the Microsoft exiles, with Sierra-Online proving to be the only publisher willing to take a risk on Valve and its big, ambitious, seemingly unachievable goals.

The results do, of course, speak for themselves. The modified Quake engine, with the addition of skeletal animation and Direct3D support, ensured that *Half-Life* looked and performed like nothing else on the market, while a script from writer Marc Laidlaw would give the game the depth and substance that so many other shooters of its time lacked. The moment-to-moment action was a refreshing change of pace; its myriad of weapons, from the mundane to the wondrously fictitious, would prove to be a huge hit, while the addition of logic-based navigation and combat puzzles would only serve to give *Half-Life* a major edge over its competition.

Half-Life may be remembered for telling a solid science-fiction story without pulling the player out of a first-person perspective, avoiding cut-scenes and yet still managing to tell a tale that felt cinematic in its scope and execution, but there really is something special about how that game actually *felt* to play. Losing yourself to the utter chaos of Black Mesa became a powerfully defining experience of the PC gaming scene.

It should come as no surprise then that the game was given a ferocious reception at 1997's Electronic Entertainment Expo (that's now E3), a reveal that would push Valve to delay the game for a year in an effort to get it *just right* – if you're wondering when Valve started building games on its own time and schedule, well, that mentality was there from the beginning. Universally praised and credited as being an honest-to-god revolution for the industry, *Half-Life* would set a new standard that very few studios would be able to match. It isn't that there weren't imitators – there have been plenty over the years – it's just that very few understood (or were able to replicate) its unique combination of elements – given the amount of time we've been waiting for *Half-Life 3*, that sentiment is now also true of Valve itself.

While *Half-Life 2* would later arrive in 2004, building and improving on almost every aspect of the series' design, there's still something special about the original. Even today, it feels bold and experimental; between the wrinkles imprinted upon it by the passing of time, the polish and passion is still evident in its core design. Gearbox Software – later responsible for *Brothers In Arms* and *Borderlands* – would expand the purview of *Half-Life* with two expansion packs: *Half-Life: Opposing Force* (1999) and *Half-Life: Blue Shift* (2001). Both would demonstrate that there was more to *Half-Life* than Gordon Freeman, first putting you into the boots of Adrian Shepherd, a HECU Marine part of the Black Mesa cover-up operation, then later giving you the role of one of the facility's security guards, Barney Calhoun. The packs, particularly *Opposing Force*, demonstrated just how powerful the world that Valve created had become; how unrivalled it would be for world building and logistical consistency. *Half-Life* was a groundbreaking release, and it's difficult to imagine a game having quite the same impact again.

KEY FACTS

- *Half-Life* was considered to be the highest-selling first-person shooter of all time. Was, that is, until *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* stole its crown in 2011. Still, it had a good 13-year run of it.

- Fans are still heavily involved in a full remake of *Half-Life*, looking to update the systems, mechanics and its graphics to modern standards. Titled *Black Mesa*, it has even been officially sanctioned by Valve.



GAME CHANGERS

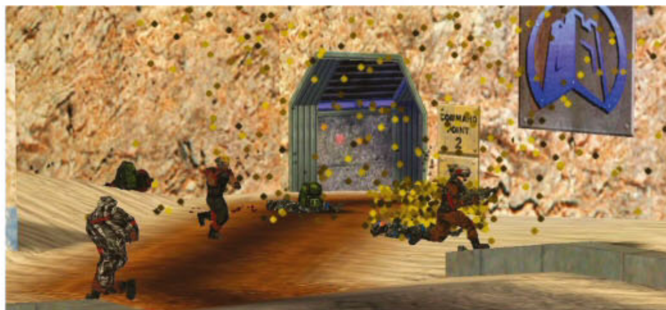
EIGHT BEST HALF-LIFE MODS

THE VERY BEST GAMES BUILT USING THE LEGENDARY GOLDSRC GAME ENGINE



COUNTER-STRIKE

It's hard to believe, but *Counter-Strike* began life as a modification for *Half-Life*. A group of dedicated fans worked to build a team-based multiplayer mod in 1999, attempting to emulate the feel of action movies. Valve acquired *Counter-Strike* and the team in 2000 and, with the support of the developer behind it, *Counter-Strike* would continue to grow and expand rapidly; the IP has now established itself as one of the biggest shooters in the world and a major attraction in competitive multiplayer circles.



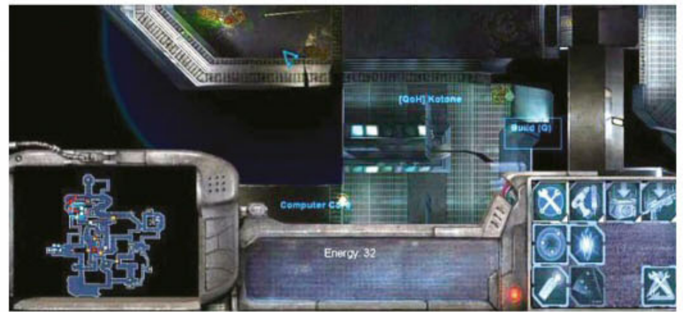
TEAM FORTRESS CLASSIC

Team Fortress' origin story starts in 1996 as a mod for *Quake* by TF-Software. While the group had planned to continue building a sequel, it was later acquired by Valve to port the popular mod over to *Half-Life*, releasing as *Team Fortress Classic* in 1999. The basics were all there (the focus on diverse play styles and class-based combat) but Valve would work to continue improving everything from its maps and modes to the core networking code, leading to a standalone release in 2003.



DAY OF DEFEAT

Medal Of Honor may have released in 1999, showing a real appetite for FPS games in World War settings, but *Day Of Defeat* is where gamers with a competitive edge would be found. Beginning life as a third-party mod for *Half-Life* in 2000, it became one of the most popular games on Valve's World Opponent Network, thanks in no small part to its relentless pace. Valve would later acquire the rights to the game and the development team, with a standalone version hitting shelves, published by Activision.



NATURAL SELECTION

One of the most innovative modifications to *Half-Life* (well, of the ones that ever made it past conception) was of course *Natural Selection*. It took elements from the real-time strategy and FPS genres, creating a hybrid that developers are still working on even today. Marines versus aliens played out across tightly controlled spaces as a designated commander worked tactics from a top-down perspective. One of the most popular mods for *Half-Life*, it later spawned a standalone sequel.



SVEN CO-OP

While *Half-Life* was always built to be a single-player experience, *Sven Co-op* looked to give players a different way to experience Valve's game world. This popular mod enabled co-operative gameplay, letting players team up and NPCs take on waves of AI-controlled enemies. It also offered a sizable single-player variant, introducing noticeably improved artificial intelligence systems. *Sven Co-op* was released in 2016 after Valve finally gave the development team the rights to publish the mod as a standalone.



DEATHMATCH CLASSIC

Developed internally by Valve, this early *Half-Life* mod saw the team taking the action of *Quake* that had inspired its earliest design work and updating it to take advantage of the heavily modified game engine. *Deathmatch Classic* featured enhanced models, lighting and textures, making the frantic FPS combat *Quake* had pioneered even smoother; it's a lovely and fitting tribute from Valve to id Software. Officially released in June 2001, Valve would bring the mod to *Half-Life* as a free update shortly thereafter.



THE SPECIALISTS

While *The Specialists* is very similar to *Counter-Strike* in many ways, the team behind it sought to put a bigger focus on action-movie insanity rather than realism. It was fast and furious, letting players re-create some of the stunts they had seen in films such as *The Matrix*, implementing Bullet Time systems into its multiplayer arenas – for fans of *Max Payne* it felt revolutionary. While it never reached the heights it deserved, *The Specialists* was an important 2002 release for the modding community.



ACTION HALF-LIFE

One of the more polished mods for Valve's masterpiece, *Action Half-Life* sought to simulate the chaos of John Woo action movies. Developed by many of the folks responsible for *Action Quake 2* and *Counter-Strike*, players flocked to this team-based multiplayer shooter. The commitment the designers had to layering complex secret areas and Easter eggs into its designs remains impressive, ensuring that games can always take a turn for the strange should players be willing to seek out surprises.

THE VAULT

Microsoft made it a big point of the original Xbox One that it would sit nicely under your TV along with other set-top boxes. That's even more true of this design.

As has been discussed in the past, this is Microsoft's smallest ever console, although the size difference between this and the Xbox One S isn't that obvious when they're sat together. Still, it's an impressive design feat for the power inside the chassis.

If you managed to get your hands on the Project Scorpio Edition of this console then you get a light, green-dot design on the front of the device, in case that's something you needed.

No major changes to report on the controller for the Xbox One X. We would have liked to have seen an Elite controller packaged with the console, but the standard model has been updated over the last few years.

XBOX ONE X

MANUFACTURER: **MICROSOFT** PRICE: **£449.99**

WE HAVE HAD SOMETHING OF A HEAD-START IN OUR REVIEW OF MICROSOFT'S LATEST CONSOLE BECAUSE IT HASN'T FELT THE NEED TO KEEP IT HIDDEN OR LOCKED AWAY IN RECENT MONTHS. In fact, every event we've been too since late August seems to have had an Xbox One X element to it, and that's given us plenty of opportunities to see the new console running alongside its less-powerful brethren. Now, having had the machine in our possession for a little longer and putting it through its paces, it's a console that remains very impressive, although our caveats on its superiority have become clearer in our mind.

We called this the new king of consoles in **games™** 191 and we stand firmly by that statement in so much as it is the most powerful on the market. If you want a version of a third-party game that is most likely to offer the best resolution and frame rate then Xbox One X is your best bet. That said, is the difference so great between PS4 Pro and Xbox One X to make it a more worthwhile purchase? That's harder to pin down.

We played a number of newer and older releases on the Xbox One X to see how it handled different titles. *Forza Motorsport 7* was the standout demonstration of the console's powers, with special reference to races where weather transitions from wet to dry. The combined 4K and HDR effect of bringing out every possible gradient of colour from the screen gives life to the wet track scenes and as the sun breaks through the sky and general lighting effects are incredible.

Shadow Of War is a big 4K launch partner, but we found that the more drab tones of Mordor didn't showcase everything this console can offer. Open fields and vistas begin to offer a better impression, while the dingy strongholds do the system less justice. However, detailing and textures get a good workout.

An interesting addition though is *Rise Of The Tomb Raider*, which shows both the best and worst of what comes from a 4K upgrade. For a start the ability to play sitting closer to a bigger screen gives games like this a full field a view experience that just isn't possible on lower resolutions. The cinematic quality of games, like Lara's latest outing, get the most out of 4K resolutions. On the other hand, some of the visual tricks or flairs used (like motion blur) in the original release come across as a little jarring on larger displays. So, that's a bit of a warning for any upscaled or 4K-patched games out there, potentially.

Ultimately how good your experience with the Xbox One X is going to be is rather heavily dependent on your game library and how developers have chosen to support the console. If their 4K conversion is strong, then this is an incredible new machine and you'll immediately see the benefits. The really mind-blowing content may still be on the way though.

VERDICT 8/10

GAMING CLOTHING



GALAXY NEWS RADIO

Gametee has a new round of shirts on offer and this nod to the wonderful soundtrack and insight available from *Fallout 3*'s number one radio station is currently our favourite. As always, the typography is excellent and the style is second to none.

www.gametee.co.uk



CYBERNETIC NINJA

There are a couple of *Overwatch*-inspired shirts available from Gametee and we love this Genji number. The classic Japanese ink style really gives it a lot of character and the kanji reads Bushin, "The balancing art of keeping peace through military means."

www. gametee.co.uk



MAD MOXXI'S CHEERY BOMB

We've missed Moxxi and Borderlands in general in recent months as we wait patiently for a new game announcement from Gearbox. While we wait at least we can enjoy this excellent design, inspired by Forties pinup art.

www.thinkgeek.com

FOR THE GAMER WHO HAS EVERYTHING



POKÉMON PIKACHU COIN BANK

PRICE: **$29.99**

A perfect gift for any gamer looking to save up some cash for the next big release on their wishlist, this money box has Pikachu reaching out and grabbing coins, storing them away for the future. It's a pretty sweet little present.

WWW.THINKGEEK.COM



8BITDO CUBE SPEAKER

PRICE: **£29.99**

For whatever situation, we think it's always a good idea to have a wireless speaker around that you can tap into to broadcast a little music or your favourite podcast. This stylistic nod to the NES is a rather nice example that will please retro gamers.

WWW.FUNSTOCKRETRO.CO.UK



MEI NENDOROID FIGURE

PRICE: **£44.99**

Aren't Nendoroids just the cutest thing ever? And could there be anything cuter than an Mei figure? Not sure there could be. Whether you're massively into *Overwatch* or not we would think this would sit nicely on the desk or mantelpiece of any gamer.

WWW.FORBIDDENPLANET.CO.UK



RADGLOW WATCH

PRICE: **$39.99**

Now this is an idea we're surprised we haven't seen a lot more of over the years. This Fallout watch actually glows in the dark, giving you that must-have irradiated and worn-out look that is so synonymous with the series.

WWW.THINKGEEK.COM



ATARI 'RETRO' HANDHELD

PRICE: **£34.99**

Lots of things to love about this Atari handheld, not least the wood finish on the device that evokes the original console design and the fact that it has an AV out port for displaying on a TV. It's all about the games, though, and that's a solid list, too.

WWW.FUNSTOCKRETRO.CO.UK



ALOY STUBBINS PLUSH

PRICE: **£13.99**

Sitting at only six inches makes this plush a perfect fit for sitting in a bedroom, living room or even on a desk. And of course it's Aloy, probably the best new hero we've seen in a videogame all generation. She's here to stay and hopefully so is this cuddly version.

WWW.FORBIDDENPLANET.CO.UK

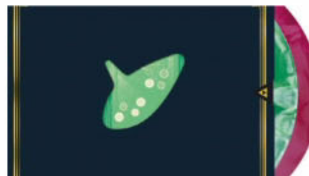


CUPHEAD DELUXE VINYL

PRICE: **$100**

Of the many things to admire and celebrate about MDHR's *Cuphead*, the soundtrack probably got the least play and that's a shame because it's absolutely spectacular. Its mix of jazz and big band sounds is packed full of energy and this four-LP collection covers it all.

STORE.IAM8BIT.CO.UK

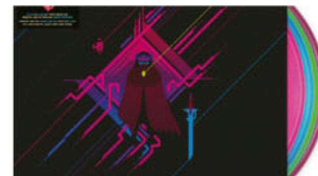


HERO OF TIME – MUSIC FROM THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

PRICE: **$40**

The Legend Of Zelda has always been blessed with great music and the *Ocarina Of Time* is no exception. In fact, it has one of the most varied and interesting soundscapes of the series, collected here on two LPs with a full orchestra.

STORE.IAM8BIT.CO.UK



HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER VINYL SOUNDTRACK

PRICE: **$75**

With music by Disasterpeace of *Fez* fame, *Hyper Light Drifter* boasted great audio alongside its dazzling pixel graphics and gradients of colour. This four-LP collection has it all, plus some gorgeous new art from Heart Machine and Drew Wise.

STORE.IAM8BIT.CO.UK

TOYS | PERIPHERALS | APPAREL | GADGETS | BOOKS

THE VAULT

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 25TH ANNIVERSARY ART BOOK - COLLECTOR'S EDITION

PUBLISHER: **COOK & BECKER**

IT'S VERY POSSIBLE THAT WE'VE NEVER SEEN A RETROSPECTIVE ON A VIDEOGAME CHARACTER OR SERIES QUITE AS COMPREHENSIVE AS THE ONE PUT TOGETHER TO MARK SONIC'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY. This Cook & Becker release is pricey, but for any fan of the blue speedster we have to say it's more or less an essential purchase.

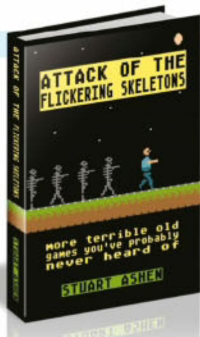
Let's start with the overall package; this Collector's Edition comes in a presentation box, limited and numbered art print of Sonic through the generations and a book sleeve that doubles as a stand, alongside the hardcover art book, which can be bought individually if you want to save some money. Inside the book is where the real magic happens though.

This collection is packed full of design sketches, level layouts, character concepts and more. It begins with a brief history of Sega's place in the games market and notably of the importance of Alex Kidd in the company's early years as an unofficial mascot before Sonic arrived. We then get to see some of the ideas the team had for cartoon animal characters (a bunny, bird and so on) before Sonic found his natural Erinaceinae form. A similar level of treatment is offered to all of the original cast of characters from Sonic's earliest releases, including Tails and Robotnik, moving on to the 3D era and some fantastic depictions of the evolution of all the cast from their flat 2D rendition to 3D renders.

Printed on heavy paper stock with some wonderful translucent inserts and gatefold scenes from the 2D games, this collection is really something to behold. We can't help but wish some more of our favourite characters from the earlier years of gaming would get the same treatment.

www.candb.com

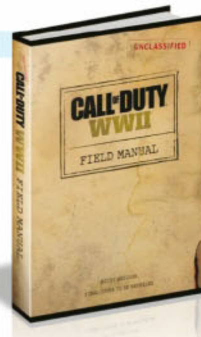
VERDICT 10/10



ATTACK OF THE FLICKERING SKELETONS

This sequel to Stuart Ashen's previous book, *Terrible Old Games You've Probably Never Heard Of*, continues the journey through gaming's most forgettably bad titles. We loved the original and this one is even bigger, breaking down exactly what makes these games so awful.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



CALL OF DUTY WWII: FIELD MANUAL

Binding the reality of the WWII with the fiction of Sledgehammer's latest release, this tome helps to showcase the amazing concept art that has helped to give the game its authenticity. The whole thing is presented like an artefact from the war, which is a nice touch.

www.titanbooks.com



HALO: SMOKE AND SHADOW

Building out the Halo universe further, the novelisations have taken the series to places the games could never reach. This is another great example as it follows the journey of salvager, Rion Forge, and the journey she goes on after finding a wrecked UNSC cruiser.

www.titanbooks.com

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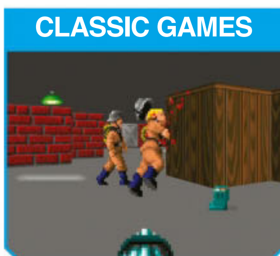
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